The New Criterion

May 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Keith Windschuttle's *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* has just been reissued by Encounter Books.

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Timeless Moments
Art Quilts by MARILYN HENRION

Byzantium VIII (Reflections)" 34" x 48" Hand pieced, hand quilted.

"History is a pattern of timeless moments..." T.S. Eliot

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Notes & Comments: May 2000

The future of taboo

Anthony Trollope once described his great novel *The Way We Live Now* (1875) as "an attack on the commercial profligacy of the age." Trollope went on to criticize his novel for exaggerating the social and moral evils it portrays. Such exaggeration, he said in his *Autobiography* (1883), is a "fault which is to be attributed to almost all satires." We wonder what Trollope would say were he with us today. Would he still think it an "exaggeration"? We suspect that almost all of our readers could provide a long list of examples, drawn from the way we live *now*, that would make the perfidy Trollope chronicled pale in comparison.

We are not thinking of anything dramatic or out of the ordinary. On the contrary, what we have in mind are the myriad little degradations and invitations to moral and aesthetic coarsening with which contemporary life surrounds us. An item that appeared on April 7 in the Marketplace section of *The Wall Street Journal* highlighted the sort of thing we have in mind. The story's headline summed up the issue: "With Eyes on Cable, Networks Permit Racier Plots, Unprintable Dialogue." Nothing new in that, you say: the fare presented on television has been getting cruder and more violent for years. The proliferation of cable channels, many of which routinely offer X-rated material, has only accelerated the process.

True enough. But it was somehow disconcerting to be reminded of how ordinary and taken-for-granted this process of degradation has become. Enthusiastically agreeing with the proposition that more graphic depictions of sex and violence equal bigger ratings, an executive from CBS explained that "we have to realize that some things are not as taboo as they used to be." His counterpart from NBC concurred: "On issues of sexuality and violence, the public has gotten a bit more tolerant." Yes, a bit. Which is why one is regularly treated to obscene language, nudity, and what are delicately referred to as "sexual situations" on network television, why one new medical drama premiers with a pregnant women getting stabbed in the stomach, why another includes an episode featuring a patient with a Golden Globe award stuck in his rectum. All this is offered to the public as greater "realism" when in fact it is simply greater cynicism and exploitation.

Of course, as the story in the *Journal* noted, "no matter how far the broadcast networks go, there are some producers who still feel stifled." That comes with the territory. The logic of transgressive titillation is

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like a narcotic: the dosage must constantly be increased simply to achieve the same effect one managed yesterday. What is happening to network television, we believe, is symptomatic of what is happening to our culture as a whole. We are witnessing both the corruption and the blunting of the moral sense.

Some people take comfort in the thought that the ubiquity of degraded and degrading material on television and elsewhere inures us to its soul-deadening poison. But there is little consolation in that process. For if most of us form a protective carapace that keeps nastiness at a psychological distance—moral calluses that buffer us from assault—the cost of that inurement can be measured precisely in our growing insensibility. This insensibility is reflected, for example, in our growing incapacity for outrage. The social critic Rochelle Gurstein put it well in her book *The Repeal of Reticence* (1996): "The price of too frequently and too regularly crossing the ever-shifting border between desire and taboo, curiosity and injunction, is desensitization: what was once shocking becomes commonplace and trivial, what was once obscene becomes banal and dull." It is worth noting, however, that the fact that a taboo no longer inspires awe and instinctive obedience does not necessarily mean that the moral peril it warns against has vanished, any more than the fact that we have become cozy with obscenity means that obscenity has ceased to be obscene. Doubtless the CBS executive was correct when he observed that "some things are not as taboo as they used to be." The question remains whether that change should be cause for rejoicing or lamentation.

Backward at "The Forward"

In 1990, the former *Wall Street Journal* editorialist Seth Lipsky created *The Forward*, a weekly English-language newspaper that was intended to carry on in the spirit of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, a paper that was founded in 1897 and became central to the Yiddish-speaking community of New York in the early 1900s. Like its predecessor, *The Forward* focused primarily on Jewish affairs. But Mr. Lipsky's inspired editorship made it a paper that was read and respected far outside the Jewish community. On any number of issues, from Israel to U.S. foreign policy to the achievements of the Giuliani administration, one could turn to *The Forward* and be sure of finding well-informed, intelligent reporting conveyed in lively, no-nonsense prose. *The Forward* has had no party-line except an ingrained suspicion of party-lines.

All that is about to change. Mr. Lipsky's editorial independence—he has the temerity to describe himself as a "neo-conservative" and even has nice things to say about Ronald Reagan—has proved to be too much for some of the owners of *The Forward*. As was reported in *The New York Times* last month, The Forward Association, which owns a half-interest in the paper, has forced Mr. Lipsky to resign, effective May 25. It is a sad outcome, as much for the future of independent journalism as for the New York Jewish community. Mr. Lipsky had made *The Forward* into the best Jewish paper in the country. If the paper survives at all it will be as neutered remnant purveying the usual liberal clichés about Israel and social policy. One of Mr. Lipsky's most virulent critics has been Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, the left-wing historian and polemicist, who was quoted in the *Times* as saying that "We are staunchly for the welfare state. Lipsky is not staunchly for the welfare state, and he should be if he wants to edit this newspaper." There you have it. Rabbi Hertzberg is fond of noting that the United States is a "plural" country. When he is not advocating higher rates of taxation, he is trumpeting the importance of diversity and liberal tolerance. But his action in the case of *The Forward* reminds us of exactly how much liberal tolerance is worth when it comes to dealing with those who deviate from liberal orthodoxy.

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Anthony Powell, 1905–2000

David Pryce-Jones writes:

The obituaries recently published for Anthony Powell are infused with elegy, as though marking the end of a tradition. Here was the last man left with the confidence to write as he pleased. The room he occupied in the house of English literature was distinct, somewhere on a staircase nobody else climbed. Before the last war, he had published several Firbankian novels so light and comic that they are almost disembodied. For more than fifty years he wrote regular book reviews for *The Daily Telegraph* with a gruffness all their own. From 1951 onwards, the twelve volumes of his roman-fleuve, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, appeared with clockwork punctuality, one every two years. Four volumes of autobiography finally depicted the social tissues out of which he had woven his fiction.

Powell once explained that "I have absolutely no picture of myself." Elsewhere he also said that he had begun to write because he couldn't think what else to do. In these respects, he was unusual. His generation included W. H. Auden and John Betjeman, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, Cyril Connolly, George Orwell, and others besides who all had clear views of themselves, and judgments to make, of the sort which allows art to be a human endeavor which can stand outside time.

The son of a colonel, educated at Eton and Oxford, Powell shared the social background of these gifted contemporaries, but few, if any, of their intellectual, political, or even artistic concerns. It is obvious from everything he wrote that he admired order, with regulated behavior down to clean fingernails and the proper attire for every occasion—that degree in society which should not be taken away, Shakespeare warns, or else "hark! what discord follows; each thing meets in mere oppugnancy." But Powell lacked the characteristic that might have been taken for granted in someone so essentially conservative, namely a moral outlook, some gauge to enable the passing of judgment. This too was most unusual.

Rather small in stature, stooping forward attentively, he had a stare with elements of offense and defense in it, under incongruously untidy eyebrows. The voice was nasal, close to a comic turn in itself. His wife, Lady Violet, was an earl's daughter, and he could discuss relentlessly the ramifications of her family tree. Genealogy absorbed him, and he hunted down abstruse information in every sort of reference book. Here was a social creature of a rather private but conventional English type. The urbanity of his manners and conversation revealed at once what was good and bad about his novels. For him, all human conduct reduced to foible. People were only the anecdotes which could be told about them. Cynicism, irony, paradox, all were unspoken even though implicit, and there was no place at all for higher things or purposes. The story was enough, self-contained, its own point, a means as an end in itself. That was the way of the world. Those who could, laughed; those who couldn't were fools.

The power of fiction derives from showing characters confronted by choices and the consequences which follow from the choices taken or avoided, as in real life. That is the function of plot, in itself sometimes a dreary mechanism, but always indispensable. Hidden within plotting are the moral values which inform the writer, and which he wishes to convey.

A Dance to the Music of Time may contain as many as five-hundred characters, in a social chronicle of the times. Powell resorted to the device of a first-person narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, evidently an alter ego. Powell's powers of observation are always clever, and sometimes even brilliant. Proust was no doubt his model, but comparison is

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wide of the mark. Proust was determined to show how and why his characters made their choices, and his plotting is accordingly contrived for his purposes. But Powell's narrator has no idea why the people he is meeting and recording have come to be the way they are, in all their vagaries and mere oppugnancy. In the absence of plot, happenstance or what Powell has called "the inexorable law of coincidence" has to serve to move action forward. The one truly memorable character is an archetypal social climber with the exactly calculated name of Widmerpool, but even his extreme case remains morally neutral. Reducing people to anecdotes, Nicholas Jenkins becomes a club bore clearing a jovial but empty space around himself.

Powell's fans are many, and they include such eminent judges as Kingsley Amis, John Bayley, A. N. Wilson, Ferdinand Mount, and Hilary Spurling. The last of the art for art's sake school, an anecdote and a grin is quite enough for them. John Bayley, for instance, has defended Powell with a learned discourse on his use of the word "lacustrine." Powell's language in its circumlocution seems to strive to fill the moral vacuum. To give just one example: "A house-party of perhaps twenty persons sitting down to dinner would be individually lucky to get more than a glass of white Bordeaux that certainly did not startle the connoisseur by its pretensions." This has the Powell stamp, but it is a bombastic way of saying that the wine was meagre and bad.

Malcolm Muggeridge and Auberon Waugh were among the few who dared to criticize Powell either as novelist or stylist. He did not take kindly to it. A formidable man for a grudge, he stuck photographs of supposed enemies in a collage on the wall of his lavatory, where he had opportunity to study them in a process of elimination. Few things riled him as much as comparison with Evelyn Waugh. He was a comedian, he liked to say, accepting the liberating power of laughter, while Evelyn Waugh was a satirist, quite differently out to change the world. Powell once asked Cyril Connolly for an opinion on him and his rival as novelists. "I said I thought Tony had more talent and Evelyn more vocation. Tony is likely to dry up and Evelyn to make mistakes, but you can learn from mistakes, you can't learn from drying up."

Elegy is appropriate: it looks like closing time in the house of English literature.

Poetry chronicle

Since its founding in 1953, *The Paris Review* has been a lively and companionable Baedeker to contemporary literary life. The editors helped popularize the Literary Interview (an innovation some of us have come to rue as the eminence of the interviewees has slipped and slipped over the years) and have generally managed to keep up a tonic attitude to the vagaries of the literary life. This broad-church approach to culture doubtless has its liabilities, but it also has its virtues. There is a friendly, bonhomous quality to *The Paris Review* that makes it a browser's treat. The Spring 2000 issue is a case in point: a special "Poetry Issue," it includes scores of poems—several good ones, too—by names famous and not-so-famous. Among the many things we can recommend is Cynthia Zarin's allegro "Auden in the Aquarium," which captures something essential about Auden's omnivorous affirmative melancholy. This special issue also includes a handful of interviews, an essay or two, contemporary poets' comments on facsimiles of the manuscripts of some famous poems (by Byron, Poe, Keats, Pope), and even a set exercise in light verse. (We applaud any effort to resuscitate the tradition of light verse.) Not everything will be to everyone's taste, but for anyone interested in the state of contemporary poetry, this issue of *The Paris Review* offers a series of evocative snapshots.

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Rewriting the history of the British Empire

by Keith Windschuttle

In the new film of Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, the writer and director Patricia Rozema includes an early scene that is not in the book. As Fanny Price departs from her family in Portsmouth to live in the grand household of her aunt and uncle, she hears someone wailing on a ship off the coast. "Black cargo, Miss," explains the coachman. The ship is a slave transport and it is meant to remind the audience that around 1800, when this scene takes place, England was still a slave-trading nation. It is also a portent of what the heroine will eventually discover is the dark side of her new home. Many among Jane Austen's legions of readers will be upset at the film taking such license with the novel because it imposes a controversial political issue onto the quintessentially domestic concerns of their favorite author. Those with a little historical and geographical knowledge will also find the scene outlandishly incongruent. Portsmouth is a harbor on the English Channel and, at the time, the transportation of slaves went by the "Middle Passage," that is, directly across the Atlantic Ocean from the Guinea Coast of Africa to the Americas. To be anywhere near the coast of England, a slave trader would have to be thousands of miles off course.

The scene is in the film because the literary critic Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) persuaded many readers that *Mansfield Park* and its author are deeply implicated in the question of both slavery and imperialism in the islands of the Caribbean, the location of the sugar plantations that funded some of England's grand estates, including that of the novel's title. *Mansfield Park* was published in 1814 and, according to Said, it was then the latest in a long line of literary products that had supported English imperial interests for the previous two-hundred years, that is, since the English Renaissance of the Elizabethan era. Said claims,

> Even a quick inventory reveals poets, philosophers, historians, dramatists, statesmen, novelists, travel writers, chroniclers, soldiers, and fabulists who prized, cared for, and traced these interests with continuing concern.

The British Empire effectively ended more than fifty years ago with the independence of India in 1947, an event that soon triggered a run of imitators. One might have thought that, at this distance, there would be little point in continuing the long and acrimonious argument between left and right over an empire that no longer exists, and even less point in seeking the high moral ground about its early accompaniments, such as the slave trade to the British West Indies that was ended by act of parliament nearly two-hundred years ago. The target of Said and other "postcolonial" critics who want to continue this debate, however, has shifted from England and its empire to the wider focus of Western cul-

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ture. Hence the interest in censuring and doctoring the work of Jane Austen and her peers who produced the canon of Western literature. The British Empire might be dead, but postcolonial critics claim its culture of exploitation persists in the minds of those who have inherited it, especially in the United States. The imperialist imperative purportedly lives on today in an expansionist American foreign and economic policy, where it is validated by Western culture.

This argument, however, will become increasingly difficult to sustain once the findings of the new *Oxford History of the British Empire* work their way into the consciousness of those who shape opinion on these matters. All five volumes of a project that actually deserves that overworked term "monumental" have now been published.[1] The first two appeared in 1998 and the final three were released earlier this year. The work contains separate chapters by 150 authors, most of whom have impressive scholarly credentials for the tasks they undertake. And, as you would expect of an academic assembly of this size, a great many shades of opinion are represented. As well as the more familiar, traditional history from above, written in the metropolis, there is now plenty of history from below, written from the peripheries, that tells the imperial story from the point of view of the colonized peoples. As could be predicted of any work in the humanities produced in the 1990s, the familiar political identity groups and their ideological triumvirate of gender, race, and class are well represented.

Nonetheless, most people who read several chapters of each volume will be impressed by the fact that, although there is some deference from the editors to the writings of postcolonial literary critics and the gurus from cultural studies, the project overall has attracted some very good historians who are disdainful of these fashions and remain committed to the traditional values of their discipline. Thanks to the efforts of this last group, the volumes demonstrate that a number of the old debating points about the politics and the morality of Britain's imperial adventure have now been resolved, at least at the level of historical scholarship if not yet in the popular media.

One of the longest running of these debates has been over slavery, especially its abolition and its contribution to the wealth of England, which, as the film of *Mansfield Park* shows, is an issue on which many liberals still feel the need to declare themselves. In the eighteenth century, English merchant ships were the principal transporters of slaves from Africa to the New World, and slave labor on English sugar plantations in the West Indies made fortunes for their absentee owners at home. Yet parliament put an end to this business by banning the transportation of slaves in 1807 and outlawing the ownership of slaves in 1833. Until the 1940s, the consensus among historians was that slavery was ended because of the strength of religious feeling and humanitarianism, expressed through the abolitionist movement of William Wilberforce and his Evangelical Christian followers. However, in a widely celebrated counterthesis, Eric Williams attacked this moral explanation and substituted an economic rationale. In 1938, Williams had been the first student from the West Indies to earn a doctorate at Oxford University. However, instead of undergoing the civilizing process anticipated by those colonial officials who had arranged his tuition, Williams discovered Marxism at Oxford. Returning to Trinidad, he revised his D.Phil. thesis and published it as *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), arguing that slavery was only abolished because, after more than a century of cropping, the monoculture of sugar cane had exhausted the soil of

1 *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Wm. Roger Louis, editor-in-chief; Volume I: The Origins of Empire, edited by Nicholas Canny; Volume II: The Eighteenth Century, edited by P. J. Marshall; Volume III: The Nineteenth Century, edited by Andrew Porter; Volume IV: The Twentieth Century, edited by Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis; Volume V: Historiography, edited by Robin W. Winks; Oxford University Press, $45 per volume.

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the West Indian islands, and the estates had become unprofitable. Prohibiting the transport of slaves would prevent French expansion on other islands in the region while the British transferred their plantations to Asia. Moreover, while attacking the traditional explanation for abolition, Williams constructed an even more audacious moral case of his own about the place of slavery in the English economy. The profits from the transport and sale of slaves, he argued, made a substantial contribution to financing the industrial revolution in Britain. Hence, all those subsequent generations of Europeans who have enjoyed the standards of living provided by industrialism have done so from capital accumulated on the backs of black slave labor.

There are two chapters in the Oxford history that examine Williams's still influential thesis and come to quite different conclusions. In volume II, J. R. Ward reviews the literature on abolition and concludes that Williams was mistaken about the economic decline of the West Indian plantations. In fact, they had only recently introduced higher yielding cane varieties, more efficient crushing and refining technologies, and, because of livestock expansion, a more abundant supply of manure for fertilizer. The Caribbean was still of considerable economic importance, employing half of England's long-distance shipping and providing one-eighth of exchequer revenue, while its credit remained a vital element of the London financial market. "When abolition was finally enacted," Ward writes, "British West Indian trade stood at record levels."

In the same volume, David Richardson analyzes the contribution of the slave trade to the industrial revolution in Britain and finds Williams's claims are exaggerated. Profits from slaving voyages contributed less than 1 percent of total domestic investment in Britain at the time. "Such calculations do not suggest," Richardson observes, "that the slave trade was vital to the financing of early British industrial expansion." Richardson also examines other claims that the slave trade caused widespread depopulation and economic dislocation in Africa, that it caused the "underdevelopment" of Africa. While he does not doubt the torment and pain inflicted on those enslaved, he notes that the lack of data on trends in output and population in pre-colonial Africa makes it impossible to calculate either the social or economic costs of the trade. But we do know that as well as those who suffered, there were many Africans who benefited. Control of the slave supply remained firmly in the hands of African brokers and merchants. European slave transporters waited at coastal ports to pick up their cargoes, which were captured in the hinterland by African dealers and tribal leaders. Richardson notes the terms of trade—the amount of goods given for each slave bought—moved heavily in favor of the Africans from 1750 onwards. This meant that indigenous commercial and political elites within West and Central Africa made large and growing profits from slavery, thus increasing their wealth and power.

There has also long been a dispute about the economic impact of British imperialism on India. This dates back to the late eighteenth century when Edmund Burke called in parliament for an end to corruption in the regions then controlled by the East India Company, claiming its officers had destroyed the fabric of the Indian economy and society. In volume II of the Oxford history, the Indian historian Rajat Kanta Ray continues this critique, describing the new economy introduced by the British in the eighteenth century as a form of "plunder" and a catastrophe for the traditional economy of Mughal India. He blames the British for the depletion of food and money stocks and the high level of taxation that caused the great famine of 1770, which carried off one-third of the population of Bengal. However, P. J. Marshall in the same volume reviews a number of recent works that have reinterpreted the received view that the prosperity of the formerly benign Mughal rule gave way to poverty and anarchy. Rather than represent-

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ing a sudden disruption, Marshall writes, the British takeover did not make any sharp break with Indian patterns of rule. British control was delegated largely through regional Mughal rulers and was sustained by a buoyant Indian economy in certain regions and sectors for the rest of the eighteenth century. The British took Indian bankers into partnership and raised revenue through local tax administrators, maintaining existing Mughal rates of taxation. (Professor Ray agrees at least with this last point, observing that the East India Company inherited an onerous taxation system that took one-third of the produce of Indian cultivators.) Instead of the nationalist account of the British as alien aggressors, seizing power by brute force and impoverishing the areas under their control, Marshall offers a story, now backed by a number of scholars in both South Asia and the West, in which the British were actors in what was essentially an Indian play and in which their rise to power depended upon a high level of cooperation with Indian elites. But he also notes that much of this story is still rejected by many historians working in India today.

Unfortunately, in some other regions of the former empire, where the economic consequences are no less contentious, the Oxford history presents only one point of view, that of nationalist complaint. For example the major essay on Egypt in the nineteenth century is written by Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, a professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles. She tells us that British investment before 1880 had incorporated Egypt into the global economy, producing the modernization, diversification, and industrial growth that made the country a major international supplier of raw materials, especially cotton. However, after Khedive Ismail's constant borrowing and waste on unproductive investments brought bankruptcy in 1875–76, followed by a British takeover in 1882, all this changed. Even though the British returned the economy to solvency by 1888–89, she claims that their "tide of commercial rapacity" denuded the country's wealth, produced growing numbers of poor and landless peasants, and inhibited industrialization. Moreover, Professor Sayyid-Marsot claims that the position of Egyptian women declined dramatically under British rule. Under earlier Islamic law, she writes, women were free to own property, invest widely, and sue in the courts. However, in the 1880s and 1890s they were encouraged to adopt European fashions, consume European goods, and learn European languages. For some reason she neither explains nor supports with evidence, these shifts in taste were not liberating but, she claims, reduced women's ability to manage their own economic affairs and made them even more dependent upon men.

Even though the editors of the five volumes have deferred to nationalist perspectives by commissioning separate articles on almost every country that was at some time part of the empire, and have employed mainly local historians to write up these area studies, the message that emerges clearly from the series is that the long-familiar nationalist grievances about economic exploitation, originally developed to support the various independence movements, no longer provide a credible platform for writing the history of the empire. They are about as useful as the stories told in the Victorian and Edwardian eras about how the main purpose of the empire was to spread civilization and liberty. Instead of continuing to impose the standpoint of twentieth-century nationalist movements, several authors in the Oxford history emphasize a broader perspective derived from world history and the economics of modernization.

The result is that the empire, while deriving largely from the internal dynamics of British society, can no longer be understood in the quasi-Marxist terms of exploitation and underdevelopment. As two of the contributors to the these volumes, P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, argued in their persuasive work *British Imperialism* (1993), after

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the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, England became the first country to develop a modern financial and banking system. The City of London then set out to become the financier to the world, providing short-term credit for trade and long-term credit for investment. Within a century, Britain also underwent the industrial revolution, which gave it a surplus of low-cost, factory-manufactured goods for which it sought world markets. As the leading force in finance and manufacturing, and as the dominant European naval and military power, Britain had every reason to expand across the globe and few to prevent it doing so. From the vantage point of hindsight we can now see that the principal artefact it exported to the world was not "civilization," as many thought at the time, but modernization. In terms of economics, this meant the systems of finance, transportation, and manufacturing that Britain had developed at home. Rather than a form of plunder that depleted the economies that came under its influence, British imperialism injected many of the institutions of modernization into the territories it controlled.

In those countries where British culture and legal systems already held sway, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, modernization was a comparatively painless process. In others, like India and the Middle East, the political, cultural, and legal systems remained relatively impervious to British influence. As A. G. Hopkins points out in volume V, the latter countries had their own internal dynamics that governed the direction and the pace of their evolution. They were not susceptible to Western brands of social engineering. However, while imperialism might not have dramatically transformed their culture, it could and usually did lead to the modernization of their financial and technological infrastructure. And no matter how hard some historians of these latter regions try, they can no longer argue that these changes were essentially for the worst. For instance, in volume III, D. A. Washbrook, who writes about India between 1818 and 1860, does his best to portray the downside of the equation. Early in this period, he writes, British control led to short-term economic depression and long-term economic backwardness as the factory manufactures of England undermined India's former export markets and as deficits in British-controlled Indian trade with China led to a contraction of the money supply. By the end of his period, however, Washbrook acknowledges the evidence for the many positive results of the investments made by British financiers in railways, ports, and factories, which gave Indian products world markets, which led to long-term economic growth and some short-term economic booms in the second-half of the century, and which also augmented the resources of the unmodernized agrarian sector of the economy.

Modernization is a process that, almost everywhere it has been tried, has disrupted the traditional economy and uprooted people, leading in some cases to successive generations of farmers becoming landless and impoverished, in Britain itself no less than in other countries. But once a modern takeoff has been accomplished, it not only increases the wealth of the population as a whole, but also contributes noticeably to such indicators of human well-being as decreased morbidity, increased longevity, and dramatic declines in infant mortality. One of the great tragedies of the second-half of the twentieth century is that in the struggle for independence from the empire, many nationalist leaders overplayed the disruption caused by imperial governance. They believed their own propaganda that the capitalist economics that accompanied it were nothing less than a sophisticated form of theft. Once they gained independence they chose to pursue the path of modernization through socialist policies. In several parts of Asia and Africa, they were counselled by economic advisors from the USSR. As a result, they condemned their populations to fifty years of economic stagnation and, for the lowliest members of their society, humiliating poverty and hunger.

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While the USSR might now be a spent force, the theories that accompanied its international influence are still being promoted in the intellectual market place. As the Oxford history demonstrates, this is especially true in debates over the imperial economy. Apart from the nationalist grievances discussed above, the major debate is over what is called the "informal empire," that is, the claim that the British Empire not only encompassed the countries it formally annexed but also those where it became the dominant foreign economic influence. This informal empire is claimed to have encompassed North and South America, China, and even parts of Southeast Asia that were nominally controlled by the Dutch and the French. From this perspective, Britain was not only the head of an empire but also controller of the world economy.

The Oxford history is especially useful for its treatment of the informal empire. Volume V is entirely devoted to historiography, that is, to the shifting interpretations and emphases made by historians of the empire over the span of its life. In introducing this volume, the editor-in-chief, Wm. Roger Louis, notes that the 1953 article "The Imperialism of Free Trade," by the English historians Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, has become the most cited piece in the historiography of British imperialism. Robinson and Gallagher portrayed the empire as an iceberg, with the formal empire only the visible part. Below the waterline was a much vaster empire of informal trade and influence. Long before the 1880s and the scramble for Africa and the Middle East, British free trade had established a global empire of dependency and influence. At the time they wrote this piece, Louis observes, Robinson and Gallagher were committed British socialists who were wary of both the USSR and the USA. They were especially worried that the postwar American program for the economic revitalization of Europe, the Marshall Plan, would reduce Britain to an American satellite, just as they believed Britain had itself reduced others in the nineteenth century. For this analysis, plus their other influential work, *Africa and the Victorians* (1961), Robinson and Gallagher both eventually succeeded to the position of Beit Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth at Oxford, long the most prestigious chair in imperial history.

The influence of their work, however, spread much further than the portals of English academic institutions. They shifted the debate about the economic consequences of imperialism onto the stage of world history. They persuaded many people that a country did not have to be conquered militarily to lose its independence. The same could happen through trade and investment from a more powerful economy. They also breathed life into the notion that capitalism was a world system controlled by the dominant ruling class, a view that became popular in Western intellectual circles following its endorsement by the French Annalist historian Fernand Braudel in *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century* (1979) and by the Marxist sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein in *The Modern World-System* (three volumes, 1974–89). The thesis they originated lives on today in leftist critiques of globalization, in European policies to restrict trade with the United States, and in recent events such as the riots in Seattle over the World Trade Organization's attempt to increase free trade and reduce international tariff barriers.

However, despite the editor-in-chief of the Oxford history putting Robinson and Gallagher on something of a hero's pedestal, there are other chapters in the series that provide enough evidence to seriously question their "informal empire" thesis. In volume II, P. J. Marshall argues that they underestimated the political and economic obstacles to effective domination. In South America, it was only in Brazil that the British found pliant political collaborators. In the United States after 1776, Britain could exert no political influence, although there was a population long habituated to British goods and able to pay for them through large exports of primary produce.

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Over much of Asia, Marshall argues, indigenous political systems were still largely beyond the reach of British diplomatic influence or even the threat of British warships and Indian troops, while intercontinental trade had little influence on most Asian economies. "Concepts of informal empire," Marshall writes, "are even more difficult to apply to Asia, outside the Indian subcontinent, or to Africa, than they are to the Americas." In volume III, Martin Lynn devotes a persuasively argued chapter to the same thesis. He says that the idea seriously exaggerates both the British government's willingness to intervene overseas before the 1880s, and its success in establishing more than a superficial paramountcy over parts of the wider world. Lynn points out that there are conceptual limitations to the use of metaphors such as "informal empire" or "informal control" to understand Britain's relations with these areas. The metaphors distort what was actually a more ambiguous and fluid form of influence and are unhelpful in implying that this influence was all one way, from Britain to the outside world, rather than a mutually permeable process. Lynn concludes:

> That Britain established a commercial or financial presence in a region did not mean, necessarily, that she gained either economic or political paramountcy over it. Only at the highest level of abstraction can Latin America, China, Ottoman Turkey, and Africa in the mid-nineteenth century be described as parts of a British informal empire.

Some of the most fervent advocates of the "informal empire" thesis are those postcolonial social theorists and literary critics who have gained a major foothold in academic life in the United States and several countries of the old empire, especially India. Indeed, the postcolonial theorist network is one reason why there are now so many Indian academics employed in the humanities departments of American universities. These critics argue that, instead of Britain, it is now America that rules an informal world empire. Volume V has a particularly illuminating discussion of their ideas. It is by D. A. Washbrook who, as I noted above, is by no means inclined to portray the British in India in the nineteenth century in favorable terms. He begins his chapter on "Colonial Discourse Theory" by praising the "dazzling" analysis and "withering critique" of the guru of this movement, Edward Said, and quickly slips into the mind-numbing jargon, replete with innumerable scare quotes, that writers in this genre seem to find obligatory:

> Critical discourse theory re-interrogates the past with a view, not to establishing "scientific" truths and narrating stories of progressive emancipation, but to exposing the particular conditions under which various "knowledges" were produced and authorized; the self-referential ways in which they "represented" the subjects of their study; and the relations of domination by which their own constructs were imposed on those subjects, at the expense of the latter's "different" understandings.

And so on for half-a-dozen pages, paying the now-familiar obeisance to Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as well as drawing particular attention to Ranajit Guha and his "Subaltern group" of radical Indian historians. Without warning, Washbrook then turns his whole approach around and produces perhaps the best brief demolition job on this movement yet written.

Although they address historical topics, members of the Subaltern group offer a radical critique of the discipline of history, which they see as an intellectual product of imperialism itself. They want to destroy the distinction between fact and myth, to reconceptualize time, to insist that Indian history can only be written by and for Indians themselves, and to subvert the logic of history as a field that produces knowledge. In general, if a category or concept is used by Western historians, this identifies it as part of Western or Enlightenment discourse, and so the Subalterns insist on

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rejecting it. But as Washbrook points out, this makes it very difficult to write an Indian-oriented history because there are many elementary concepts about Indian society, such as "Hinduism" and "caste," for example, which the British adopted because they found them being used first by Indians themselves. Moreover, the Subaltern group has recently drawn fire from the old left in India for its abandonment of Marxist terminology such as "class" and "capital" in favor of concepts such as "community," "hierarchy," and "authority." Their critics have observed that colonial discourse theorists prefer such traditional concepts because most of them come from upper-status groups among the formerly colonized people who were privileged by colonialism. Washbrook points out that, over successive volumes, their journal *Subaltern Studies* has allowed topics such as the oppression of the peasantry to disappear from its pages, to be replaced by the *angst* of the Calcutta intelligentsia. Other critics have noted that the majority of colonial discourse theorists are now employed not in the former colonies but in Western, especially American, universities. Washbrook comments:

> However little the ontological categories of such theory may make sense of the colonial past, they fit perfectly with the political categories of "multiculturalism" inside present-day Western societies themselves. The rhetoric of racial and ethnic "victimization" speaks to a political agenda most relevant to the contemporary West. Such theory also provides a means by which members of now multicultural bourgeoisies located in the West can reassert affinities with and claims to authority over the societies which they left behind. In a final irony, colonial discourse theory becomes a new mechanism of imperialism in an age of multicultural, globalized capitalism.

Another point that Washbrook might have made is that, beneath all its attempts at reconceptualizing historiography, the post-colonial movement is still operating with a very simplistic notion of imperial history. It has not moved beyond the old nationalist assumption that the process was one of conquistadors subjugating natives, of foreign devils vanquishing the traditional owners. A reading of the new Oxford history makes this dichotomy very difficult to sustain. In India and in the Near and Middle East, rather than a stable indigenous society being overturned by external aggressors, the process involved one imperialist replacing another. The Mughals were not the native rulers of India but Muslims from Persia who conquered much of the previously Hindu territory of the subcontinent early in the sixteenth century. Before their rule had lasted three-hundred years, the British displaced them. It was a similar situation in North Africa, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and the Persian Gulf. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, the Ottomans (a people originally from the steppes of Asia) ruled from Constantinople a vast territory that had been formerly controlled by Arabs, who had, in turn, captured it from the Roman Empire of the East. These lands subsequently came under British control, in some cases with the approval of the Ottomans themselves.

Moreover, the British were by no means fully in control of these events. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Britain was involved in a struggle for supremacy with its Great Power rival, France. Each operated on the assumption that a gain for the other would be a setback for itself, and so a kind of territorial arms race eventuated. The British takeover of India actually began with a series of small trade wars with the French, which soon escalated into a struggle for dominance on the subcontinent. In Asia, Britain was also attempting to stem the expansion of its other rival, Russia, which had recently extended its domain eastward all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The British knew that without their military presence in India, the Russians would attempt to take their place.

At this distance, it should make more sense to look on these events dispassionately, to try to understand, rather than

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evaluate, the interests and pressures on the various players. However, no matter how anachronistic it might be to impose our own values onto those of two and three centuries ago, the fact that the consequences of imperialism are still with us seems to compel moral judgments about the process. Historians have long been bound up with this, no less than politicians, churchmen, and other opinion makers. In the long term, the most difficult moral issue has been the sharp division between the political rights accorded to people of British descent and to those of other races.

In his foreword to volume II, Wm. Roger Louis points out that by the late eighteenth century, two very different aspects of British political rule had emerged. On one side were the areas of European settlement that were evolving representative government. On the other were areas where rule was, at best, a form of "enlightened" despotism.

> The language of liberty informed the ideology of the American Revolution, yet plantation owners in the West Indies found no difficulty in using the same vocabulary in a slave society. In India the British ruled over vast populations and made no attempt to introduce representative institutions.

This political legacy prevailed for the life of the empire and the double standards involved were to provoke an equally long resentment among those non-Europeans whose countries were denied the status of the white dominions. Without having to agitate for it, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand each gained a large measure of self-government by the mid-nineteenth century. But for the next century, British governments resisted transferring the same authority to India, South East Asia, Africa, the West Indies, and the Middle East, until forced either by the pressure of opinion at home or by open revolt within the colonies themselves.

Despite this discrepancy, the criteria which Professor Louis chooses in volume IV to measure the ethical status of the empire in the twentieth century are these same political issues:

> the desirability of orderly and efficient government as well as rule under law, the establishment of the courts, and the development of constitutions, which need to be mentioned if only to emphasize their later demise in Africa and elsewhere.

In toting up the scorecard, he includes the nationalist anti-imperialist movements in the non-white colonies as one of the positive achievements of the empire, not the least because of the English political values on which these movements were based. "Indians, as well as French Canadians and Afrikaners quoted John Locke, Lord Durham and John Stuart Mill," he observes. Whatever the fate of British political institutions in the post-independence era, Louis argues, the nation-state system was part of the European colonial legacy, and standards of British law and democracy continued to provide the measure by which governments would be judged.

In some parts of the old empire, this is no doubt true. Despite the Subaltern historians and their kind, it is hard to disagree with Louis when he nominates democracy in India as one conspicuous example of what he means in calling the British imperial legacy "lasting and substantial." There are, however, other territories where not only nation states based on constitutions, rule of law, and democratic government failed to eventuate after independence but also where the lives of the former imperial subjects have constituted a long stretch of misery and violence ever since. The most useful discussion of this is the chapter by Francis Robertson in volume IV entitled "The British Empire and the Muslim World." By the 1920s, Robinson points out, the British Empire embraced more than half the Muslim peoples of the world and it was the context in which many Muslims experienced the transition to modernity. In the diplomatic settlements at the end of the

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First World War, Britain had to resolve the conflicting understandings it had reached with Arabs, Zionists, and the French over the position of the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The result was the formation of three new, highly artificial states: Iraq, composed of Shia and Sunni Muslims, a large number of discontented Kurds, and a host of tribal groupings; Palestine, carved out of three separate Ottoman districts and which for nearly 2000 years had been little more than a geographic expression; and Transjordan, a state with no administrative region, no specific people and no historical memory. In Africa, two other artificial states were created: Nigeria, hopelessly divided between Christian peoples in the south and Muslims in the north; and Sudan, with similar antagonisms between a Muslim north and Christian south. The largest and most artificial nation created by Britain was the Muslim state of Pakistan, which originally contained an eastern province that became the independent state of Bangladesh after a civil war in 1971. Of all the above states, only Transjordan has since gaining independence escaped the fate of a long succession of internal violence involving quasi or outright civil war, political assassination, military takeover, and chronic economic disruption that in several cases has produced food crises and starvation. In these states, no matter how many failings one can point to among the post-independence rulers, the imperial legacy remains directly implicated because it created the terrain on which the subsequent conflicts were fought out.

In short, the transition to independence of a sizable part of the empire was a badly handled mess. Much of the blame for this lies with those critics of imperialism, in both the metropolis and the colonies, who were more concerned to end its rule quickly rather than wisely, and who were even less concerned that the boundaries of several new states saddled them with problems that were unresolvable except by violence. The Oxford history makes clear that, before the rush to disband it, British imperial rule in many parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, while it might not have been representative or democratic, was nonetheless orderly, largely benign, and usually fair. For all their faults, most British colonial officials delivered good government—or at least better government than any of the likely alternatives. The lives of millions of ordinary people in these countries would have been much happier had the British stayed longer, that is, until a more satisfactory path to independence and a more sensible map of territorial boundaries had been drawn up. Indeed, the uncivilized conditions in which many people in the old imperial realm now live is evidence that the world would be a better place today if some parts of it were still ruled by the British Empire.

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Five Yugoslav classics

by Stephen Schwartz

In the former Yugoslavia, literature matters. The world knows that the former Yugoslavia boasted numerous good writers, in the same way that it produced remarkable films and, recently, even more notable ethnic demagogues and frightful wars. And, as in Russia, South Slavic authors are widely known and read in their own territories, although in the decade following the disintegration of the country they considered theirs, those alive today have lost most of the public influence they once enjoyed. Yet the fact persists; among Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Macedonians, and Kosovar Albanians, writers of the past and present often count as much or more than politicians, pop singers, or sports stars.

Living in Sarajevo, I can cite considerable evidence for this claim. I have frequently heard people who survived the 1992–95 siege of the city describe with nostalgia the hundreds of days they spent reading in basement shelters. Sarajevo is also strewn, on fair weather days, with impromptu sidewalk businesses where scavengers in destroyed houses offer books for sale. And even under Communism, the school curriculum included challenging classics so that virtually every basically educated individual can discuss the main South Slav authors.

The importance of literature in the region was well illustrated at the end of 1999, when Sarajevans were treated to a series of arguments in mass-circulation weeklies over who deserved recognition as the greatest Bosnian writer of the century. The scandal sheet *Dani* ("Days"), which appears to pride itself on its lack of journalistic ethics, led the way for several issues, finally settling on the 1961 Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić (1892–1975), a name certainly recognized, if not very well known, among foreigners. *Dani* contributors identified Andrić's novella *Prokleta Avlija* ("The Damned Yard") as the outstanding Bosnian work of fiction. The runner up was *Derviš i Smrt* ("Death and the Dervish") by Meša Selimović (1910–82), who is largely unknown outside the former Yugoslavia.

As is often the case with *Dani* and other Bosnian journals, however, this discussion had little to do with the merits of the writers. Rather, the two authors, and their works, were symbols of something else, immediately obvious to all local readers. Andrić, a Bosnian Croat who redefined himself as a Serb, has been virulently attacked by certain Bosnian Muslim intellectuals for his perceived hostility to Balkan Islam and its adherents, both Bosnian and Albanian. In upholding Andrić over Selimović, whose very name bespeaks Muslim influence and whose main works feature Muslim protagonists, *Dani*'s editors sought to make a point about politics in Sarajevo today—that they would defend the quality of literature against the nationalist criteria allegedly imposed by the Bosnian Muslim political leadership.

This game is a popular one in Sarajevo,

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where people can instantly indicate their political orientation by the use of literary banners. For some young intellectuals, including Muslims, the defense of Andrić really does mean an insistence on writerly independence. And for many other people, to be for Andrić involves a stand for tolerance toward Serbs, as well as affection for the dead Yugoslavia, socialism, and Tito. To be for Selimović is, then, ostensibly to be a Muslim chauvinist.

In fact, such considerations involve a considerable dose of bad faith, for although the main boulevard in Sarajevo is named for Selimović, and his memory is treasured by Bosnian Muslims, he, like Andrić, also wanted to be remembered as a Serb. After all, Belgrade, the Serbian capital, was also the capital of Yugoslavia, with the main literary scene in the country. But sadly, Selimović, all of whose work bespeaks an obsession with the independence of the individual and the autonomy of conscience —themes barely present in Andrić—ends up being treated as an Islamic apparatchik, while Andrić, whose career included at least one undeniable fling into extremist Serbism, is honored as a hero in the cause of artistic integrity.

The main competition for *Dani* is another weekly, *Slobodna Bosna* ("Free Bosnia"). *Slobodna* is viewed with considerable irritability by many older Sarajevans as a sensationalist rag virtually indistinguishable from *Dani*. But where *Dani* offends by attacking religion and accusing prominent politicians and intellectuals of outlandish crimes, *Slobodna* provokes more by its sense and taste, which involve offering substantive political reporting alongside columns on punk rock, in a format dominated by screaming headlines.

In any event, *Slobodna* won the competition for literary seriousness. Rather than insulting Islam and the Bosnian Muslim leadership under the pretext of literary criticism, *Slobodna* offered a balanced appraisal, not just of Bosnian fiction but of all South Slavic writers in the twentieth century. In arguments summarized by the outstanding critic and journalist Ozren Kebo, *Slobodna* offered a list free of demagogy, in which the real Bosnian spirit was evident. In its pages, the best Yugoslav novel of the century was identified as *Grobnica Za Borisa Davidovića* ("A Tomb for Boris Davidovich"), by Danilo Kiš (1935–89), a writer of Serbian and Hungarian Jewish origin who is widely read and appreciated in the rest of Europe and the United States. Selimović's *Death and the Dervish* was ranked second, followed by two volumes of Andrić, *Na Drini Cuprija* ("The Bridge on the Drina") and *Travnička Hronika* ("Days of the Consuls," also translated as "Bosnian Chronicle"). Next came *Povratak Filipa Latinovicza* ("The Return of Philip Latinovicz") by the Croatian author Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981), and a book by the Serbian writer Miloš Crnjanski (1893–1977), *Roman o Londonu* ("A Novel About London").

Although Krleža and Crnjanski are known in the West mainly among transplanted Croats and Serbs, all of the foregoing books except the last have been translated into English and are in print. And while Crnjanski's *Novel about London*, a highly idiosyncratic work, will probably never see the light of English translation, his most famous book, *Seobe* ("Migrations"—actually the first volume in a series of the same title) has been published in the United States and Britain. Thus the lists can be evaluated, even if one knows nothing at all about the Balkans aside from what appears on the television news.

One crucial fact must be stated: none of these five authors saw himself as a local nationalist. Kiš addressed himself to the world. Selimović and Andrić, as noted, were non-Serbs who adopted a Serb identity. Krleža treasured and defended Croat linguistic traditions, and Crnjanski wrote about a quintessential Serb hero. But all five saw themselves as Yugoslavs first, and it is inconceivable that any of them would have lent his talent to the ethnic polarization that has inflicted so much pain and horror on the country in which they lived.

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Danilo Kiš's work has gained the largest international audience of these five writers—and to give the devil her due, Susan Sontag was instrumental in introducing Kiš to English-speaking readers. He has frequently been compared with Jorge Luis Borges, to whom he explicitly admitted a debt. *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*,[1] the lead novella in the collection of the same title, is unquestionably a Borgesian work. But it is also much more.

The narrative describes the life of a Russian revolutionary and victim of the Stalin purges, Boris Davidovich Novsky. In what might seem an authentically Borgesian fashion, the tale begins with a reference to a book, the *Granat Encyclopedia*, said to include "246 authorized biographies of great men and participants in the Revolution." But Novsky's name, we are told, is missing from this source. Further, Kiš writes, "in his commentary on this encyclopedia, Haupt notes that all the important figures of the Revolution are represented, and laments only the 'surprising and inexplicable absence of Podvoysky.'" But even Haupt, we are told, ignores Novsky, "whose role in the Revolution was more significant than that of Podvoysky."

Here, in a manner undetectable to the great majority of his readers, in Yugoslavia as well as the rest of the world, Kiš trumped Borges. For unlike the noted "Tlön encyclopedia" invented by Borges, the *Granat Encyclopedia* is real, the biographies are real, Haupt is real, and Podvoysky was, as Haupt noted, inexplicably omitted from them. The *Granat Encyclopedia* was a reference work famous in the Russia of the 1920s. Its biographical essays of the main Bolsheviks have been translated and published in English under the title *Makers of the Russian Revolution: Biographies of Bolshevik Leaders*, edited by Georges Haupt, a French historian. (In reality, N. I. Podvoysky was obscure but not unimportant; he was a member of the original committee that organized the Bolshevik insurrection in St. Petersburg in 1917, later serving as an assistant military commissar under Trotsky.)

The *Granat* biographies are known today only to the most assiduous researchers on the Bolsheviks, but they are extremely vivid, thorough, and fascinating to read. Kiš, who seems to have stumbled on them, was obviously charmed by their literary qualities, for his invented protagonist, Novsky—and, rest assured, there was no such person—is assembled out of details drawn from the *Granat* profiles. In this way, Kiš arrived at an extraordinary creation: by "lifting" the most characteristic details from the lives of the Bolsheviks, he created a collective memorial for a whole generation of radicals who were utterly destroyed by the regime they had brought into being. Virtually every significant aspect of the life of Novsky is based on fact, making a continuous counterposition to Borges. As Kiš seems to be telling us, the inventions of Borges are nothing compared to the conceits of verifiable history. While Borges is occasionally unnerving, Kiš is, finally, terrifying.

Thus, Kiš's Novsky uses pseudonyms employed by the actual Bolsheviks, such as "Parabellum," named after a pistol and made famous by the Polish Bolshevik Karl B. Radek. He becomes "a functionary of the powerful union of Jewish hatmakers in Paris," an item borrowed from the life of the Soviet trade unionist Solomon A. Lozovsky. His lover is a beautiful woman revolutionary, Zinaida Maysner, based on an easily identified personage, Larissa Reisner. Larissa Reisner was the companion of a Soviet diplomat, Fyodor F. Raskolnikov, while Kiš's Maysner falls for A. D. Karamazov, as the author's method becomes increasingly explicit.

It would be unfair to Kiš and to readers to expose all the underpinning in this tale. Suffice it to say that Kiš knew exactly what he was about. Reisner, a kind of Bolshevik amazon, died young (as her double, Maysner, is said to have expired before thirty, of

1 *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, by Danilo Kiš, translated by Duška Mikić-Mitchell; Penguin Classics, 135 pages. This edition is temporarily out of stock. An edition is available in England from Faber.

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disease in a faroff place). But Radek was a victim of the show trials of the mid-Thirties, Lozovsky was killed in the anti-Jewish purge of 1952, and Raskolnikov, who defected to France, was probably murdered by Soviet agents. The fate of Boris Davidovich Novsky is appropriately dreadful.

Kiš's *Boris Davidovich* is a story about history, and its effect on Central and East Europeans, but it is also an examination of a life lived in the service of an esoteric philosophy. It is in this regard that Kiš is truest to his mentor, Borges, for Kiš, like Borges, was also obsessed with the kabbalah. But in the Western cities evoked by Borges, occult wisdom is benevolent; as others have noted, the "universal history of infamy" spun out by the Argentine genius seldom exceeds the criminality of pickpockets and petty swindlers. In Kiš's half of Europe, which is also that of Lenin and Hitler, Stalin and Tito, the Croat autocrat Franjo Tudjman and the Serb tyrant Slobodan Milošević, infamy was and is deeper and more lethal. These concerns also inform the author's second best-known book, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. It and *Boris Davidovich* seem much weightier, however fragile their form as collections of short stories, than his more traditional novels, such as *Hourglass*, although the same issues still appear.

Meša Selimović's *Death and the Dervish*,[2] is also about esoteric knowledge. Set in Bosnia in the eighteenth century, it is the story of a Sufi, or Muslim mystic. But the parallel between the life of an Islamic spiritualist and that of a Bolshevik revolutionary is obvious to local readers of Selimović's work; just as the work of Danilo Kiš serves as a literary coda to the legacy of Lenin and his cohort, so too Selimović's is replete with references to the Sufi classics, such as the Spanish Muslim writer Ibn Arabi. This origin in ideology and its illusions is not the only element of Selimović's work that bespeaks a similarity to that of Kiš. Both were experimenters with narrative form. While Kiš mastered the Borgesian art, involving the merger of history, essay, and fiction, Selimović refined the technique of the internal monologue, crafting a limpid discourse that makes his *Dervish* an exquisite poem in prose, if not a literal representation of the higher means of expression to which the Sufis aspire.

Yet the tale told in *Death and the Dervish* is hardly occult. Rather, it is a parable of injustice, power, and moral weakness in the face of both, drawn from the tormented experience of the author himself. The dervish of the title, Ahmed Nuruddin, must contend with the arrest of his brother by the implacable Ottoman authorities. Similarly, Selimović's own elder brother Sefkija was arrested in the aftermath of World War II. A Communist Partisan, Sefkija was found guilty of an exceedingly minor violation of "socialist morality." Placed in charge of a storehouse of confiscated goods, he had borrowed some small pieces to furnish his own dwelling. He was accused of malfeasance of "the people's property" and done to death as a warning to the masses.

In *Death and the Dervish*, Selimović obviously wrestles with his own sense of guilt and cowardice in the wake of this terrible episode. But the greatness of the book, especially for foreign readers, resides less in its broader lessons about human personality, or even its marvelous evocation of Bosnia-Hercegovina under Turkish rule, than in its sensitive and elegant use of language.

Here is the beginning of Selimović's extraordinary description of the impact of a surviving pagan holiday—in which young girls, to celebrate the beginning of summer as well as to enhance their own fertility, bathed naked in rivers and millraces—on the pious Muslim mystic, a resident of the "kasaba" or settlement of Sarajevo:

> Broken night whispered between houses as young people moved excitedly in the streets and courtyards. Giggling, a distant song, and

2 *Death and the Dervish*, by Meša Selimović, translated by Bogdan Rakić and Stephen Dickey; Northwestern University Press, 473 pages, $49.95, $19.95 paper.

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> murmurs were heard, and it seemed that on this Saint George's Eve the whole kasaba trembled in fever. Suddenly, for no reason, I felt separated from all of it. Fear crept into me unnoticed, and everything around me began to acquire strange proportions—the people and their movements, the kasaba itself no longer seemed familiar. I had never seen them like this before, I had not known that the world could become so disfigured in a day, in an hour, in a moment—as if some demon's blood had begun to boil and no one could calm it. I saw townspeople in couples, heard them, they were behind every fence, every gate, every wall. Their laughter, talk, and glances were not like on other days: their voices were muffled and heavy. A scream cut through the darkness, like lightning in an impending storm. The air was permeated with sin, the night full of it.

It would be difficult to compose a more faithful and eloquent invocation of the dangerous exhilaration of Sarajevo, a city built along a rushing Alpine stream, in which nature and civilization seem uniquely melded, and in which passions always seem held in check, but ready to erupt. Selimović also possessed a unique ability to express the internal conflict in Bosnian Muslims, between the near wilderness in which they live and the rigors of the faith they profess. His work is obviously the best available for foreign comprehension of Bosnian Muslim identity, in the past and present, as well as in the future.

Ivo Andrić, a Bosnian Croat by birth but a Serb by conviction, took the conflict between Bosnian wildness and Islamic discipline, or, as he always seemed to see it, tyranny, and the ensuing propensity, over centuries, for the country to suffer violence, as the major theme of his writing. The "damned yard" in the work of that title is the central courtyard of an Ottoman prison. Of the five authors under consideration here, he was the most traditional, and the only one who did not identify with a broader European modernism. His novels are purely descriptive and rather pedestrian in their composition—his defenders always praise him as a storyteller of the old school—with an undeniable sheen of nationalist ideology. They are very much a product of the Slav Romantic upsurge against the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, and Andrić himself was imprisoned in 1914 for involvement in the *Mlada Bosna* ("Young Bosnia") conspiracy that took the life of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, and brought about the First World War.

Andrić is an author of "big books." Sarajevo is replete with copies of *The Bridge on the Drina* that have been bought by members of the international community employed here and put aside after an attempt at the first chapter. But while it is absurd to argue, as his promoters do, that a reading of Andrić suffices to educate a foreigner in Balkan reality, one needs to make his acquaintance. *The Damned Yard*,[3] as a novella, is the best introduction to him.

Although Andrić was never a literary experimenter, *The Damned Yard* evinces an effective but somewhat precious formal structure. A story written by a storyteller about stories told by storytellers, it describes the recollections of a young Bosnian Franciscan about the reminiscences of a recently deceased friar, who rambled repetitively about the things he had seen and heard in the world. The elder cleric, Fra Petar, was once imprisoned in Istanbul, and in "the damned yard" of the Ottoman lockup he heard one particularly affecting tale from another teller of tales, a Turkish political prisoner.

The chain of recounting proceeds from twentieth-century Bosnia to fifteenth-century Istanbul and Rome, reinforcing the sense of the proximity of history in the Balkans. In the "damned yard" men from throughout the empire—Fra Petar, the Croat Catholic priest; Haim, a Jew from

3 *The Damned Yard and Other Stories*, by Ivo Andrić, translated by Celia Hawksworth; Dufour Editions, 218 pages, $24.

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Smyrna; and Krikor, an Armenian, in addition to various Turkish characters—have been assembled, and each has his own way with language and truth. This sense of epic as the central fact of existence, as well as its trail of human transmission, has made *The Damned Yard* as popular as it is.

The Damned Yard also has its weaknesses. It is too short, a novella that should have been a novel. Its main narrative artifact, the story told to Fra Petar in the prison by the political suspect Kamil Effendi, is surprisingly flat, being an account of the conflict between the two sons of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, the victor at Constantinople in 1453, who remains alive in the Balkan collective memory even now at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It has rather bald nationalist clues: one son, who loses his influence, leaves the Ottoman domains, and becomes a hostage to the pope, is said to be born of a mother "of Serbian royal blood." This is not the only instance where Andrić treats a Muslim hero as, in effect, a Serb struggling to free himself from an alien legacy—and this conception has played a ghastly role in the bloodletting that has marked Yugoslav history in this century, with Serbs often demanding that Balkan Muslims acknowledge their "inner Serb" or die. Kamil Effendi, who narrates the story of the defeated son, with whom he identifies, is also said to be half-Christian in origin.

The central declaration of *The Damned Yard*, which justifies the tale, is equally redolent of nationalist oversimplification. After Kamil Effendi has related the history of the rival brothers, the author comments,

> it all amounted to the same thing: there are two worlds, between which there can never be any real contact or possibility of understanding, two terrible worlds condemned to eternal war in a thousand forms. And between them was a man who, in his own way, was at war with both these warring worlds.

The two worlds are, of course, those of Christianity and Islam. And, illogically, the author seeks to have it both ways: the worlds are locked in combat, without the possibility of mutual comprehension, but tragic individuals combine them in a single personality. Many Bosnian Muslims and other residents of the former Yugoslavia cannot forgive Andrić's emphasis on the former point, for the idea of "eternal war in a thousand forms" is not very distant from the propaganda of Radovan Karadžić, the Bosnian Serb chieftain indicted as a war criminal, who insisted that asking Muslims and Serbs to live together in Bosnia-Hercegovina was the same as asking dogs and cats to cooperate.

Andrić undeniably evinced a certain Balkan "whiggery," recasting his historic Bosnia to flatter the Serb nationalists of a later generation. In any event, whatever their differences and frictions, Muslims, Serbs, Croats, and Jews did live together in Bosnia-Hercegovina for centuries, and the country has had the same borders since the early eighteenth century, longer than any other European state! And while the experiment in transborder country-making called "Yugoslavia" failed, its literature comprises both of the "warring worlds" of Andrić's purview. The five authors presented here are proof of that.

For these writers borders are porous, and empires are impermanent. Yet one seems to proceed along a hall filled with echoes when reading Kiš, Selimović, and Andrić in succession: always, there is the obsession with oppressive rulers, and the helplessness of men and women faced with them. But worse than the baffling bureaucracies depicted by Kafka and other subjects of the Habsburg empire, power in these authors' works is more than arbitrary and heedless; it is vindictive and brutal. That is the Islamic and Orthodox heritage. But while the remaining authors on our list, Krleža and Crnjanski, also deal with irrevocable human destiny, their stories are set in the Catholic west, and the lives of their protagonists are free of the iron hand of extreme despotism, though not of overbearing government, and not of a greater eternal fate.

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Miroslav Krleža created a universe, out of his own insights and his command of language, that is an exact representation of that in which he lived, and we live, in the glittering cities of the Western Hemisphere no less than in rural Slavonia. His work reminds one of the great painters: it is our common reality, but only he can show it to us as he does. An adulation of Krleža among Croats is predictable and understandable for he is among the finest European writers. Numerous Yugoslavs, and not only Croats, thought he deserved the Nobel that was presented to Andrić. Ex-Yugoslavs often ascribe the granting of such recognition to official lobbying, and many believe Krleža was done out of a Nobel for political reasons. This is, above all, because although he was extremely proud to be considered a Yugoslav, he would never have Serbified himself the way Andrić did.

In addition, Krleža, although a Communist, was a dissident long before the term was popularized, indeed, before the idea of dissident Communists was even heard of in the broader West. He was extremely lucky to have made it through the Stalin era at all. And he was a lifelong doubter. He loved his Croatian idioms as much as his Yugoslav identity, but he detested nationalism, and he hated what flags and symbols had done to the lives of ordinary people, over the centuries. Indeed, we may even say that while the peace of the Yugoslavs died with Tito in 1980, their conscience died with Krleža a year later. For me, Kiš at his most incisive, Selimović at his most poetic, and Andrić at his most exotic are very small alongside Krleža. And yet he was free of arrogance, and would have put the interest of any of them ahead of his own. He would even have given his life for their freedom to write, their freedom to be. It is immensely frustrating to realize how difficult it is for foreign readers to comprehend his achievement, since so little of his work has been translated.

It is unlikely that the early books that made Krleža famous, *Hrvatski Bog Mars* ("The Croat God Mars"), his early outcry against the waste of Croatian manhood by military service to foreigners, or *Glembajeva* ("The Glembajs"), a series of portraits of a typical family of ambitious Croats, will be translated soon. They are simply too marginal to the interest of the foreign public, and are now too old. Nor will his *Dijalektički Antibarbarus* ("The Dialectical Antibarbarus"), a polemic against Stalinism, which could have lost him his head, see the light of English soon, although in a better world it would be studied by every Anglo-American Slavicist and historian of Communism.

We are lucky to have two of his greatest works in English: *Na Rubu Pameti* ("On the Edge of Reason") and *The Return of Philip Latinovicz*.[4] The former is a short book, and a delightful excursion for readers who can surrender themselves to an unfamiliar milieu. It tells the Candide-like tale of a respectable lawyer who, in the middle of his life, commits a social error: he speaks candidly at a party to the boorish host. (This is not a unique situation in South Slavic literature: Meša Selimović's second great work, *Tvrdjava* ("The Fortress"), focuses on a similar incident, but with a very different outcome.) The narrator's resulting fall from grace, prominence, and prosperity propels him to the bottom of European society in the late 1930s, and on the way he meets exemplars of every form of political and social pretension and pathology in evidence at that time. *On the Edge of Reason* is one of Krleža's great expressions of protest against nationalism and totalitarianism. Nevertheless, the existing translation cannot be recommended, mainly because, having been done during the Tito era, it was printed, according to the Yale South Slavicist and Krleža expert Ivo Banac, with its sharp comments about the Communists of the 1930s excised.

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4 *On the Edge of Reason*, by Miroslav Krleža, translated by Zora Depolo; New Directions, 182 pages, $10.95. *The Return of Philip Latinovicz*, by Miroslav Krleža, translated by Zora Depolo; Northwestern University Press, 230 pages, $54.95, $14.95 paper.

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By contrast, nothing should prevent an educated American reader from enjoying *Philip Latinovicz* to the fullest. It is more than a novel; it is an encyclopedic examination, a dissection, of Croatian society after World War I. Tinted with a black humor of deadly seriousness, it is reminiscent of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson* with, say, the comic Jack Benny as the head surgeon. Yet it is never vulgar or superficial.

Latinovicz describes the memories, inner turbulence, and environment of a successful modernist painter who, after more than twenty years out in the world, has returned to his original home, a rural Croatian hamlet. His intent is obvious:

> To live for a while amidst mares and cats, amidst village rumors, to feel a rough calf's tongue on one's palm, to watch plants growing, from day to day ever increasingly green and lush, with mathematical precision adjusting themselves to the maximum amount of light and sunshine, those were soothing things for Philip's neurasthenia.

But, of course, the way back from maturity and the city brings him, another Croat Candide, to nothing like a rural idyll. Rather, the place is a provincial hell. The artist and his mother hold each other in contempt; the setting is dominated by ludicrous, failed personalities stuck in the Habsburg glories of a previous generation. Latinovicz feels himself to be going mad, and is driven in that direction by another refugee from the city, a poseur named Kyriales. No more should be said: the rest is left to the reader.

All of the works discussed so far were produced for an audience that knew, and knows, how to read. However, the last, Crnjanski's *Migrations*,[5] should perhaps stand first in a group offered to foreigners. But unfortunately, its author is so little known to the world outside the former Yugoslavia that his name was rendered as Tsernianski when the book was published in English, in 1994, and it seems to have made no money for Harcourt Brace, which issued it. That edition is correctly labeled "volume I," which is somewhat misleading. The first book in Crnjanski's *Migrations* series was published in 1929, the rest decades later, and the first can stand on its own.

Migrations is a book that may be enjoyed by almost any reader. It is the rousing, romantic story of Vuk Isakovič, a Serb mercenary soldier fighting in the Rhineland in the early eighteenth century in the service of the Austrian empress Maria Theresa. Crnjanski was a serious literary modernist and a great stylist, yet it is conceivable that *Migrations* could satisfy fans of Tom Clancy. The story is fast-paced, but never surrenders to action for its own sake. And its level of detail is exceptional; like Krleža, Crnjanski was a gifted observer of people as well as an expert on the time about which he wrote.

Vuk Isakovič, the book's hero, is potbellied, has lost his youthful looks, and has become exhausted and querulous after years as a paid combatant. His wife is at the end of her tether. His soldiers must forage for food, and are hanged as thieves; his fellow commanders are fools. But these characters possess an essential vitality that is amazing to behold. The underlying power of *Migrations* comes from its transmutation of popular consciousness; for generations of Serbs, the military profession abroad was the only honorable alternative to submission to the Ottomans. And in Vuk Isakovič, Serbian military honor has its greatest literary exemplar.

Crnjanski was an authentic Serb patriot, but unlike Andrić, whose Serbism was adoptive, Crnjanski never felt called to enunciate nationalist rhetoric or to rationalize primitive hatred. Vuk Isakovič makes no fancy claims for the superiority of Christian to Islamic civilization, or of the Orthodox East over the Catholic West. His situation is, in a sense, hopeless; he must fight to survive, but in the service of others.

5 An edition of *Migrations*, translated by Michael Henry Heim, was published in 1994 by Harcourt Brace, but is now out of print.

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But his only hope is his religious Orthodoxy and the loyalty it inspires to a mystical conception of Russia, where he intends someday to flee, thus ending his migrations.

Yet the Orthodoxy of Vuk Isakovič is simple and pure, untainted by demagogy. Throughout the book he feels pressured by the Austrian authorities to convert to Catholicism, yet in a memorable passage, he tells himself,

> Just as my sweet Orthodoxy did reside forever within my mother, so shall it reside forever within me and those who come after me. Our Russia is also sweet. I pray to God the creator to show me the way there! Russia! R for the Resurrection, U for the Universe, S for the Slavs, S for Salvation, I for the Immortality of Christ, A for . . .

The fictional Vuk Isakovič is therefore a worthy counterpart to the spiritual Muslims in Selimović's books, who reside on the other side of the imperial borders of that time, and, like Kiš's *Boris Davidovich*, he is a true believer, but an unselfish one, turned toward an ideal Moscow. Crnjanski's work is the most important in moral terms of those under discussion, for his vision of Serbian patriotism, although intense, is sane and even noble, which is saying something when one considers the uses to which Serbian pride has been put in recent times.

Readers would be correct in perceiving a pattern here, and it is heartbreaking. South Slavs, Yugoslavs, Bosnians, Croats, Serbs: all have been terribly susceptible to big words, big ideas, big promises. The landscape is tragic, but its writers have, on more than one occasion, transmuted the materials God gave them—as he gave them to the peasant, the dervish, the mercenary, the revolutionary, the artist, the petty functionary, the usurper, the martyred and the decadent—in a way that makes great literature. Suffering has its rewards.

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Roman holiday

by Karen Wilkin

Let's try a game—something like those "which does not belong" quizzes in elementary school—think of a great period for art in Rome. Ancient Rome. Yes, obviously. Medieval Rome. Yes, although there isn't much of it left. Renaissance Rome. Of course. Baroque Rome. Self-evident. Rome in the eighteenth century. Rome in the eighteenth century? Not what first leaps to mind when we think about the city of the Caesars and the Medici popes, of Raphael and Bernini. Yet if we reflect, even briefly, we remember that throughout the eighteenth century Rome was the symbolic center of the world of art and culture, the great destination for painters, sculptors, architects, and poets from all over Europe, for English aristocrats on the Grand Tour, French novelists, German art theorists, Scottish lovers of antiquity, and more.

Well into the nineteenth century—and possibly longer—a sojourn in Rome was an ardently desired, essential part of the education of anyone who hoped to be considered a civilized, cultivated individual. Artists and laymen alike were drawn to the city by both the omnipresent traces of its glorious past and the marvels of its vital present. They were equally fascinated by the celebrated ruins and lovingly salvaged antique statues, and by the palazzi and piazze, the broad avenues, magnificent churches, and fountains of modern Rome—the great public and private works, often newly completed or still in progress, that irrevocably changed the face of the city during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, to a large extent, set a standard for the rest of the Western world for the next hundred years or so. (Yes, I know the appearance of modern Rome owes an enormous amount to the heroic urban transformations initiated by Sixtus V at the end of the sixteenth century. But keep in mind that the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps, the present form of the Piazza del Popolo, and the enchanting little Mozartian stageset of miniature palazzetti opposite S. Ignazio—among many other monuments—were all products of the eighteenth century.)

By the 1700s, the glories of ancient Rome had long vanished. The Forum, half buried by the passing centuries, was known as the *Campo Vaccino*—the field for grazing cattle—while acres of the once dense urbs within the Aurelian Wall were given over to orchards and fields. But if eighteenth-century Rome was no longer notable for republican virtue or imperial majesty, it could boast instead of an international pool of talent and consumers of talent—a polyglot, constantly fluctuating community of affluent visitors, powerful aristocrats, high-ranking ecclesiastics, papal diplomats, and artists from all disciplines, some passing through, some staying for extended periods, some established permanently. Eighteenth-century Rome was famous, too, for its public pomp and private elegance, and for the artisans who made both possible. "Made in

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Rome" was synonymous with fine craftsmanship, invention, and luxury. (Think of what "made in Italy" connotes today, as applied to clothing, furniture, jewelry, leather goods, light fixtures, or cars, and you get the idea). Grand Tourists brought Italian prints and paintings back home with them; priests imposing Catholicism on Latin America ordered elaborate vestments from Rome; and local aristocrats, both in and out of the church, patronized the best of the local talent.

In the eighteenth century, anyone wanting to experience the excitement and artistic energy of the Eternal City would have had to undertake a long and often uncomfortable journey. All we have to do, at least until May 28th, is visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art for an introduction to "The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome."[1] The show is a delight. It's huge, opulent, and learned. Nearly 450 works by more than 160 artists—including paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, architectural renderings and models, decorative objects, furniture, and textiles—have been assembled from a great many often obscure, hard-to-get-to locations, to form a spectacular ensemble that powerfully evokes the special flavor of Rome. The exhibition seems to distill the city's theatricality, its peculiar blend of continuity and transience, hard-headedness and hedonism; it captures the way Rome appears to be made up of impenetrable, inexhaustible layers and, at the same time, to be seductively available, even to the *forestiero*—the outsider. A show this vast could be overwhelming, but everything is presented with a delectable wit, charm, and lightness of touch utterly in keeping with the period under scrutiny. It's all organized so intelligently and handsomely, and the wide-ranging material is frequently offered with the tongue placed so firmly in the cheek, that the result is both illuminating and intensely pleasurable. But if "The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome" is enormous fun, it is never frivolous. The exhibition brings a complex, contradictory subject vividly to life and makes it seem perfectly intelligible without shortchanging the complexity; the accompanying catalogue, a massive compendium of serious, valuable information, is as scholarly and sober as anyone could desire. (Of course, the show is also a delicious exercise in nostalgia for those of us lucky enough to have spent some of our formative years in Rome, as I and one of the Philadelphia Museum's curators did: Fulbright fellows sharing an apartment across the street from the Pantheon.)

First: a dazzling prologue stating some of the exhibition's main themes and subtexts. The tradition of view painting is announced by the *Grand Interior of the Pantheon* (1734, National Gallery of Art, Washington) by Giovanni Paolo Panini, the vast domed space enlivened by a cross section of contemporary Roman society: fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen, devout peasants, sleek churchmen, and humble monks. At first glance, the picture seems merely an adroit rendering of a recognizable Roman landmark, executed by one of the most accomplished Italian artists in the city, the sort of thing a wealthy visitor would take home. But even if Panini's *veduta* did end up in the collection of the Duke of Norfolk, the picture is not simply a glorified souvenir. The Pantheon had (and still has) special resonance as a potent, living connection between ancient and modern Rome. Revered as an amazingly intact survivor from antiquity—the best preserved of all ancient buildings—it was, and is, admired both for its stunning interior volume and its marvelous engineering. (The Pantheon remained the world's largest space covered by a dome well into the twentieth century,

1 "The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome" opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on March 16, 2000 and will remain on view until May 28. The show will reopen on June 25, 2000 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and be on view until September 17. A catalog of the show, edited by Edgar Peters Bowron and Joseph J. Rishel, has been published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Merrell (568 pages, $95, $70 paper).

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until the Germans built a sports palace somewhere.) The very fabric of the building bears witness to the course of the Roman Empire. Initially constructed by Augustus's son-in-law Agrippa, restored after a fire by Domitian, rebuilt by Hadrian, and restored again by Septimus Severus and Caracalla, the Pantheon after being sacked by barbarians was claimed for Christianity by a seventh-century pope, and dedicated to Mary and all the martyrs. And if that weren't enough, Raphael is buried there. Not just a recognizable Roman landmark, then, but a paradigm of Rome's long, intricate cultural history. And in the context of the Philadelphia show, there's yet another layer; since Panini, a native of Piacenza who came to Rome at the age of twenty, was an instructor at the French Academy, the painting can also stand for the links between Italian artists and the foreign community during the *settecento*.

Panini's restrained, elegant picture is contrasted with a lush, informal gouache of a formal Italian garden by the French painter Hubert Robert. It's a charming bit of rococo froth that serves as a further reminder of Rome's attraction for artists from everywhere, since the picture is an echo of the summer that Robert and his friend Jean-Honoré Fragonard spent at the Villa d'Este in 1760, a stay that was to have lasting effects on the later work of both of these talented young painters.

The real star of the prologue, though, is a mind-boggling, oversized inkstand in the form of the Quirinal Monument—obelisk, colossal statues of Castor and Pollux, and all—replicated in gilded silver, lapis lazuli, and rosso antico marble by Vincenzo Coaci, Rome's most celebrated silversmith of the period. Described by the curator Joseph J. Rishel as "a maniacal *tour de force*," the inkstand actually can be adjusted to show the monument both before and after Pope Pius VI added the obelisk. All this and an amazing gilded leather case!

After this rousing overture, "The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome" unfolds logically and informatively. We are gradually led from the panoramic and the general to the intimate and the specific, passing from sections devoted to the appearance of eighteenth-century Rome to groupings designed to reveal some of the ideas that animated the buildings rendered by the *veduta* painters and printmakers: from "The City" and "Palaces" to "Private Worlds" and "The School of Art." Finally, the exhibition comes full circle with a "show within a show" of drawings and etchings by Giovanni Piranesi. These celebrated, dramatic *vedute di Roma* take us back to our starting point. In between, stimulated by the selection and orchestration of the works in the show, we can ponder subtle questions about the aims of the academy and conceptions of ideal beauty; we can ruminate on the characteristics of national styles and the effect of contact with paradigmatic antique sculptures and Renaissance paintings on the artists who flocked to Rome; or we can simply savor the rich and various objects and images in the show.

"Rome: The City" offers a comprehensive range of iconic topographical images, from meticulously painted views of the Castel S. Angelo and Saint Peter's by Vanvitelli (the transplanted Dutchman, Gaspar van Wittel, who founded the Italian school of *veduta* painting) to Giuseppe Vasi's engraved panorama of Rome—the inclusion of Vasi's preparatory drawing is a nice surprise—and Giambattista Nolli's astonishingly accurate 1748 plan. An assortment of paintings by Panini and some less celebrated colleagues enrich the mix. It's like a superior travel album in which subject matter is often more engaging than the way it is presented, although Panini stands out for his ability to suggest both vast interior and exterior spaces and the dusty light of Roman afternoons. There's the occasional unexpected treat, as well, such as a muscular chalk drawing of a ruined Roman circus by Richard Wilson, the Welsh-born pioneer of landscape painting.

"The Making of Modern Rome" shifts the emphasis from image-making as record

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to image-making as invention through a selection of drawings and models for projects, both built and unbuilt, by some of the most important architects working in the city at the time. There were plenty of them —not only aspiring practitioners eager to study first-hand the surviving monuments of antiquity, but also accomplished locals and foreigners hoping to benefit from what amounted to a building boom. The 1700s in Rome were marked by vast amounts of new building, both ecclesiastical and secular; an ambitious program of decorative schemes, both public and private; and a new interest in restoring ancient monuments, everything from family chapels to monumental fountains glorifying a pope who made an ancient Roman aqueduct operative once again. Rome attracted architects from all over to compete for these prestigious projects and the show's selection of their proposals, whether realized or fantastic, offers a glimpse of both the ideals and the energy of the period.

"The City of God" serves as a framework for a small group of relentlessly embellished votive objects and vestments that, in turn, set the stage for several galleries of important devotional paintings. It's like a case study in the meaning of "The Grand Manner"—(category: History Painting; subcategory: religious)—a demonstration of what training at the academy was supposed to achieve: "to bring us nearer to that ideal excellence which it is the lot of genius always to contemplate, and never to attain," as Sir Joshua Reynolds told the graduating students of the Royal Academy. Academic training was intended to direct aspiring painters to "the great examples of the Art" so that they could receive "at one glance, the principles which many Artists have spent their whole lives in ascertaining." But, Reynolds continued, this would be beneficial only if they offered "implicit obedience to the Rules of Art." Going to Rome was a reward for this obedience, a chance to apply the "Rules of Art" in the presence of the real thing.

However unnerving modern viewers may find the assumption that rules of art existed (to say nothing of the notion of implicit obedience to those rules), we can't help being impressed by the general level of ability, assurance, and ambition of the painters of the devotional pictures in the Philadelphia show, most of them associated, one way or another, with the academies. Many names are obscure and many works are the kind that you briefly look up in your Touring Club Italiano guide before continuing to search for the Guercino said to be in one of the chapels on the North aisle of some infrequently visited provincial church. But the skills of all of these artists were honed to an extraordinarily high degree of facility; organizing groups of large-scale figures into harmonious, geometric structures held no terrors for them, no matter how obscure the subject or difficult the pose. Some were obviously more inventive than others, but there wasn't one who couldn't draw fluently or paint just about anything, filtering his own ideas through the best efforts of his most celebrated predecessors. (That male pronoun is deliberate since Angelika Kauffmann was the only female painter of the period to play in the all-male History Painting league; that she did so successfully in Rome, where she spent almost half her life, is admirable, but that's a fact, not an endorsement.)

We are treated to full-size altarpieces, studies for ceilings and funerary monuments, small-scale images meant for private devotions, and more. The cumulative effect is to reinforce the implicit—or maybe explicit—message of Coaci's inkstand, leaving no doubt that the eighteenth century in Rome was as much an age of sumptuousness and excess, of brilliant technical skill and flashy accomplishment as it was an era of homage to the austere high-mindedness of antiquity. Much of the work in "The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome," in fact, seems like a last outburst of Baroque voluptuousness, frequently tempered by playfulness. As sheer *painting*, it's all immensely competent, even, at times, brilliant, but it's

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also true that many of these pictures can verge on silliness and sometimes do more than verge. Luckily, a witty installation subverts much of the incipient pomposity of the most, shall we say, problematic images; a "dead child" section that includes a judgment of Solomon and some miraculous restorations, plus a slightly naïve rendering of the salvation of a cleric buried up to his neck in the rubble of a collapsed building, allows comparisons and offsets a slightly hysterical emotional pitch and lurking campiness.

This is not to undervalue the exhibition's abundance of first-rate works—pictures by such marvelously adept painters as the Tuscan Pompeo Batoni, now best known as a dazzling draftsman, then regarded as one of the two preeminent painters in Rome; the second, Anton Raphael Mengs, the transplanted son of a Dresden court painter, also figures prominently in the show. Jacques-Louis David's *Saint Roch Interceding for the Victims of the Plague* (1780, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille), one of the last works he painted in Rome before returning to Paris after a stay of about five years, is a show-stopper. The health department of Marseille apparently wanted a picture to commemorate the city's horrifying plague of 1720 and commissioned it from a *pensionnaire* at the French Academy in Rome for reasons of economy. For once, parsimony paid off. David's *Saint Roch* is an eloquent cascade of generously scaled, emotionally linked figures descending in slow stages from a thoughtful madonna—rather like a Roman matron—through the robust, imploring saint to a pile of terrifying, terrified victims: everything bathed in cool, form-defining light. The madonna and Saint Roch turn away, involved in private negotiations; only the stricken mortals below confront the viewer. At once a summing up of the heritage of Guido Reni and Guercino, and perhaps even Caravaggio, the picture—improbably—also seems to point forward to Delacroix. Admittedly David's agonized victims, like their counterparts in Delacroix's work, have their origins in Poussin, but it's harder to find a common basis for the uncanny expanding distances of *Saint Roch*, which seem to prefigure the space in many of Delacroix's paintings. (I am not trying to make David into a romantic *avant la lettre*. *Saint Roch* is, in any event, fairly atypical; David's later, archaeologically meticulous scenes of classical virtue unfold in shallow, stage-like spaces.)

Almost equally striking is the solemn, restrained *Miracle of Saint Benedict* (1744, S. Francesca Romana, Rome) by the expatriate French painter Pierre Subleyras. (His wife, Maria Felice Tibaldi, was a distinguished miniature painter and the second woman admitted to the Accademia di San Luca.) Actually part of the "dead baby" series (the saint revives a dead child abandoned on the monastery steps), the picture is most notable for its subtle, elegantly deployed range of whites—the monks' robes—and for the complex "carving" of pictorial space described by the positioning of figures, the fall of drapery, and the angles of the setting. What is fascinating is how irreducibly French both David and Subleyras appear. Their thorough understanding of the great tradition of Italian art, from antiquity on, is palpable, yet no one would attribute their firm, architectonic, economical compositions to anyone but a French painter.

After this immersion in the devotional, the secular subjects showcased in "Private Worlds" come as something of a relief. There are scenes with literary antecedents and portraits of foreign visitors by Italian painters, such as Batoni's charming likeness of the future Countess Stanhope, aged three, or his splendid depiction of Sir Wyndham Knatchbull-Wyndham, not, it seems, a character out of P. G. Wodehouse, but a prototypical young Grand Tourist, as attested to by a setting of columns, drapes, classical statuary, and distant temples. There are also mythological subjects and unclassifiable pictures like the *Ideal Landscape with Bacchus and Ariadne on the Isle of Naxos* (1741, Sandra H. Payson Collection), by the

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Dutch-born Henrik Frans van Lint, known as "Monsù Studio." It seems pretty tame, at first glance—a setting derived from Claude Lorrain and a figure group borrowed from an engraving of a Guido Reni, with a little help from Poussin—and then you notice that the shallow bay in the middle distance is filled with elephants. Well, they are obviously meant to be elephants, although they look more like pigs with long straight tails at both ends. Of course, Bacchus is supposed to have come to Naxos from India, but still. Context for these remarkable efforts is provided by furniture with sumptuous marquetry and inlays, and other fine examples of domestic decorative art.

With "The Art School," we come face to face with the serious issue of the influence of antique prototypes, and with unintentional hilarity. The most absorbing works are by young artists, such as David and his counterparts, who reveal both their ambition to declare themselves as individuals and their reverence for the officially sanctioned heroes of the academy. Once again, David stands out, here because of the economy and power of his reclining nude *Academy Male, called "Hector"* (1778, Musée Fabre, Montpellier), one of his first important Roman works. The picture signals in its clear, geometric volumes and potent masses everything that the young painter was learning from the antique and everything that he would be in the future. Once, again, however, there's a hint of how David's legacy would be transformed by a future generation. The inert weight of the body, the pallor of the dead flesh, and the outward-spilling diagonal pose seem to anticipate the foreground figure of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*.

"The Art School" also includes several contenders for "most inadvertently ridiculous picture": a Gaspare Landi of Hector, Andromache, and their son Astyanax that involves lots of brow-smiting, with everyone turned to display their classically correct profiles, or an obscure Danish academician's *Philoctetes*—the Achaian whose outcries from an incurable wound, a punishment for hubris, caused his shipmates on the way to the Trojan War to abandon him on an uninhabited island—a demonstration of how to tie a living model into a knot. Problematic in a different way is another *Philoctetes* (1787–88, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Chartres), by David's star pupil Jean-Germain Drouais, an enormously talented young painter who died in Rome of smallpox, aged twenty-five. Drouais's suffering hero sits in a cross-legged pose, part classical river god, part improvisation, with a convenient swath of drapery hiding the difficult transition between the two. There are ravishing passages of painting, but it's hard not to giggle at Philoctetes's uprolled eyes, like something out of a silent film, or at the way he fans his wounded foot with a severed bird's wing. The oversized feet and straining toes remind us of the academy's official position on depicting emotion. Using facial expression was discouraged; those uprolled eyes are about as far as one might go. Reynolds, of course, had something to say on the subject. The much-admired figure group, *Laocöon*, he pointed out, may have had "more expression in the countenance" than any other antique statue—understandably, given the unpleasantness of being strangled by giant snakes—but the "passion" that *Laocöon* alludes to "is still more strongly expressed by the writhing and contortion of the body than by the features." Keep that in mind in the presence of the show's "how to depict suffering" selections.

My vote for "most unintentionally hilarious sculpture" goes to the over-inventive restoration of a Roman torso by the Scottish painter and excavator Gavin Hamilton, in collaboration with the Italian sculptor Bartolomeo Cavaceppi. (It may be significant that the name translates as "extractor of tree stumps.") To anyone with a smattering of art history, the twisting torso is instantly recognizable as a copy of Myron's *Discobolus*, yet Hamilton and Cavaceppo, in keeping with the eighteenth-century taste for completeness, added missing limbs and

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props that turn the piece into a Diomedes—another Greek hero of the Trojan War—and make a hash of the athlete's pose. The result is rather like one of those university pranks that adds inappropriate accessories to a traditional campus sculpture. The addition of a head, at the wrong angle, doesn't help. It's said to be another antique fragment, but it must have been aggressively recarved, because Hamilton's Diomedes looks like nothing so much as a Regency buck in a tableau vivant.

The show concludes with a section devoted to Piranesi, an intelligent and provocative notion, since what we have seen already emphasizes the real originality and inventiveness of his well-known *Vedute di Roma*. Unlike his colleagues, Piranesi didn't simply depict the visible vestiges of antiquity, but celebrated the Romans' achievements as architects and engineers, something that his architectural training in his native Venice had perhaps specially equipped him to appreciate. Piranesi's images are potent evocations of skill and achievement, made dramatic by their energetic mark-making and their clashing, moody zones of black and white. Far from being passive records, these passionate expressions of "the grandeur that was Rome" helped to create a way of looking at and thinking about antiquity.

We emerge from "The Splendor of 18th-Century Rome" with the exhilarating sense of having been immersed in a lively, intellectually stimulating, international community of privileged individuals. Of course, the *settecento* was an era of considerably less comfort and stimulation for the non-privileged. In fact, many of the spectacles documented in the section of the show dedicated to "Pomp, Public Ceremony, and Carnival" were intended not only to please hedonists, but also to alleviate social pressure. It's good to remember, too, that some fragments of antique sculpture unearthed in Rome, installed in various parts of the city, were known as the "*statue parlanti*"—talking statues—the supposed (unprosecutable) authors of satiric messages and ribald poems criticizing the political situation left at their feet. There were riots for bread during the years that Coaci worked on that fabulous inkstand. Contrary to the impression this wonderful exhibition gives us, eighteenth-century Rome was not all magnificence and opulence. But that's subject matter for another—and probably less visually exciting—show.

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Seamus Heaney: redistributing the field

by Richard Tillinghast

Seamus Heaney's *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996*[1] makes it possible to form something like a comprehensive picture of the Irish poet's work. Slowly but unmistakably over the past thirty years, Heaney has emerged as our major English-language poet. The diffidence and caution with which he has asserted his claim as a master of the art, however, may have stood in the way of readers' grasping what has piece by piece been accumulating since the publication of his first book in 1966.

If I were to pick one word to characterize the overall tenor of Heaney's poetry, that word would be "balance." His mission has been to reconcile opposing demands, both within the culture of Northern Ireland—which he has taken pains to define and imaginatively realign—and within himself. Like no poet since Robert Frost, he has been eloquent on behalf of plainness, grounding the spiritual dimension of his vision:

> Hoard and praise the verity of gravel.
> Gems for the undeluded. Milt of earth.
> Its plain, champing song against the shovel
> Soundtests and sandblasts words like 'honest worth'.

The corollary to this, from the same late poem "The Gravel Walks," is the following directive:

> So walk on air against your better judgement
> Establishing yourself somewhere in between
> Those solid batches mixed with grey cement
> And a tune called 'The Gravel Walks' that conjures green.

And for a poet to whom circumstances have assigned such an urgent political and cultural mission, Heaney has insisted that writing on language is the raw material of poetry, without at the same time assigning writing the post-structuralist role of marionette manipulated by language.

The title of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, is arresting. What the poems signal is not death, but rather the birth and setting-forth of a poet. Looked at over the long curve of Heaney's career, the title prefigures a transcendence of the literal, which has ultimately reached its flowering in the last two books included in this selection: *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996). At the beginning and at various stages of his journey to maturity, Heaney has apprenticed himself to several masters: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Patrick Kavanagh, Joyce, Yeats, Robert Lowell, among others. But perhaps the most important of his mentors, and the easiest to overlook, is Wordsworth. Time and again Heaney revisits Wordsworth's theme in *The Prelude*: the making of the poetic sensibility, the growth and education of a poet.

In "Frontiers of Writing," an essay from *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), Heaney's com-

1 *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996*, by Seamus Heaney; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 444 pages, $25.

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ment on Wordsworth's long poem touches on aspects of his own development:

> *The Prelude* is about a consciousness coming together through the effort of articulating its conflict and crises. And the same could be said of much poetry from Northern Ireland. For the best efforts there have been evident in writing that is *a mode of integration, of redistributing the whole field of cultural and political force into a tolerable order*. (my italics)

In a prose poem from *Stations*, Heaney reveals that in school he adopted the pen name "Incertus." The *c* of the word, pronounced in the soft, Church-Latin fashion, reflected his early lack of confidence. You'd never suspect that uncertainty from "Digging," perhaps Heaney's best known poem, and the first poem in *Opened Ground*. Published just three years before the Troubles exploded in Northern Ireland, "Digging" implicitly draws a parallel between the poetic vocation and the violent path chosen by others in the province: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests; snug as a gun." But the poem is not really about politics; it's the first of many squaring-offs with family and cultural tradition. "By God," the poet exclaims admiringly, "the old man could handle a spade./ Just like his old man." After a lyrical passage celebrating the literal art of digging, however, Heaney pulls up short: "But I've no spade to follow men like them." His work will entail a different kind of digging: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it."

This poem was Heaney's announcement that he would pursue a kind of cultural archaeology. His second book, *Door into the Dark* (1969), extended the digging metaphor in that direction. Making an implicit comparison with America, the poem "Bogland" asserts, "We have no prairies/ To slice a big sun at evening." As opposed to Americans pushing a geographical frontier horizontally into the future, the Irish voyage of national self-discovery went in a different direction:

> Our pioneers keep striking
> Inwards and downwards,
>
> Every layer they strip
> Seems camped on before.
> The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
> The wet centre is bottomless.

The 1970s, when the Northern Ireland conflict reached its violent and intransigent climax, were the period of this Northern Catholic poet's most intense involvement in politics. "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" reveals a writer fed up with cliché and stultification in the language, as well as with the lies that debased language masks: "But I incline as much to rosary beads// As to the jottings and analyses/ Of politicians and newspapermen"

> . . . Who proved upon their pulses 'escalate',
> 'Backlash' and 'crack down', 'the provisional
> wing',
> 'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'.
> Yet I live here too, I sing.

Clearly, for a man whose first loyalty has always been to language itself, trafficking in the clichés of political newspeak means that whatever you say, you end up saying nothing. Emily Dickinson's advice on this subject never loses its freshness: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant"; and this has, brilliantly, been Heaney's approach. To escape from the built-in limitations on discourse within Ulster, Heaney followed the archaeological line established as early as "Digging": he looked for answers within the folklore of Northern Europe. He wrote in "Feeling into Words," a lecture given to the Royal Society of Literature in 1974,

> I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.

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He found in P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People* (1969) the theory that bodies from the Iron Age being recovered by archaeologists from the bogs of Jutland, often with their throats cut, were ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess,

> the goddess of the ground [Heaney glosses] who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog, to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Taken in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan, this is more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern.

"The Tollund Man," published in 1972, casts the preservative fluids of the bog as "dark juices working/ Him to a saint's kept body" and draws a parallel to this ritual sacrifice in "The scattered, ambushed/ Flesh of labourers,/ Stockinged corpses/ Laid out in the farmyards"—victims of the tit-for-tat "sectarian" murders in what Heaney calls in his lecture "the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power."

For Heaney, being Northern resonated beyond growing up as part of a Catholic minority with limited civil, employment, and educational rights in the predominantly Protestant British province of Northern Ireland. The Vikings, or Northmen, were, with the Gaels and the English, a formative if often overlooked force in Irish history. In his soundings of Ireland's Viking and Scandinavian heritage, Heaney found more than a heritage of ritual murder and communal revenge in *homo sapiens Hiberniensis*. His genius for assuagement and reconciliation began to surface earlier than one would perhaps readily notice. "Frontiers of Writing" makes the following retrospective declaration:

> To be a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony: this expresses what we would like poetry to be and it takes me back to the kinds of pressure which poets from Northern Ireland are subject to. These poets feel with special force a need to be true to the negative nature of the evidence and at the same time to show an affirming flame, the need to be both socially responsible and creatively free.

In "Funeral Rites" from *North* (1975), Heaney's most overtly political book, he confronts that most Irish of rituals. The first part of the three-part poem is drawn from memory, familiar to readers of Heaney's many poems that memorialize his youth in rural Derry: "I shouldered a kind of manhood/ stepping in to lift the coffins/ of dead relations." Having laid the groundwork of familiar rituals, he confronts Northern Ireland in the Seventies: "Now as news comes in/ of each neighbourly murder/ we pine for ceremony,/ customary rhythms." The poem's answer is to invoke the Iron Age funereal customs that have been revealed at archaeological sites like Newgrange in the Boyne River valley: "I would restore/ the great chambers of Boyne." He imagines a dignified procession of a type predating the rival, politicized sects of modern Christianity. Once the dead man has been interred, "the cud of memory/ allayed for once, arbitration/ of the feud placated,"

> disposed like Gunnar
> who lay beautiful
> inside his burial mound,
> though dead by violence
>
> and unavenged.

A fond wish, one might say, in a country locked into cycles of revenge between the IRA and the equally brutal Protestant paramilitaries. But Ireland is a nation created, brought into being, by imagination—a country that listens to its poets.

Seeing Things is a visionary leap, but it is grounded in the sensory images and details that have always anchored Heaney's work: an anchorage he celebrates in the second of a long sequence of twelve-line poems—four

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tercets each—called "Squarings":

> Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in.
> Drink out of tin. Know the scullery cold,
> A latch, a door-bar, forged tongs and a grate.
>
> Touch the crossbeam, drive iron in a wall,
> Hang a line to verify the plumb
> From lintel, coping stone and chimney-breast.
>
> Relocate the bedrock in the threshold.
> Take squarings from the recessed gable pane.
> Make your study the unregarded floor.
>
> Sink every impulse like a bolt. Secure
> The bastion of sensation. Do not waver
> Into language. Do not waver in it.

This is a study in how it is done, a set of guidelines on how to build the rock-solid poem to which a reader can give full assent because it is so believable, so anchored in the phenomenal, "built" world.

In "The Settle Bed," he is ready to take a leap beyond solidity and the reassurances of actuality. An old, inherited bed becomes a ship: "If I lie in it, I am cribbed in seasoned deal/ Dry as the unkindled boards of a funeral ship." Later in the poem he declares that "whatever is given/ Can always be reimagined, however four-square,/ Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time/ It happens to be." Seamus Heaney's mission is to resolve dualities, to find a middle voice between opposites, between homespun and cosmopolitan, and, on the cultural front, between the stridencies of Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist.

A poem from the sequence "Squarings" takes up again the idea of transformation between two worlds. (Clonmacnoise, on the River Shannon in the middle of the country, is one of the oldest Irish monastic sites, dating from the sixth century):

> The annals say: when the monks of
> Clonmacnoise
> Were all at prayers inside the oratory
> A ship appeared above them in the air.
> The anchor dragged along behind so deep
> It hooked itself into the altar rails
> And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,
>
> A crewman shinned and grappled down the
> rope
> And struggled to release it. But in vain.
> 'This man can't bear our life here and will
> drown,'
>
> The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
> They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man
> climbed back
> Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

Transformation and re-imagining would seem to have been on Heaney's mind since his early days as a writer. More than once he has posited tentative bridges between the Nationalist and Unionist communities. In the prose poem "Trial Runs," from the 1975 collection called *Stations*, a Protestant neighbor back from the war in Europe brings Heaney's father a peculiar present. ("Messages" are errands):

> WELCOME HOME YE LADS OF THE EIGHTH ARMY. There had to be some defiance in it because it was painted along the demesne wall, a banner headline over the old news of REMEMBER 1690 and NO SURRENDER, a great wingspan of lettering I hurried under with the messages.
>
> In a khaki shirt and brass-buckled belt, a demobbed neighbour leaned against our jamb. My father jingled silver deep in both pockets and laughed when the big clicking rosary beads were produced.
>
> 'Did they make a Papish of you over there?'
>
> 'Oh damn the fear! I stole them for you, Paddy, off the Pope's dresser when his back was turned.'
>
> 'You could harness a donkey with them.'
>
> Their laughter sailed above my head, a hoarse clamour, two big nervous birds dipping and lifting, making trial runs across a territory.

Heaney quotes George Seferis to the effect that poetry is "strong enough to help."

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The goodwill, however jocular, represented by the gift of the rosary posits a warmth between the Protestant and Catholic communities on the personal level that subverts the historical intransigence urged by the standard political slogans painted on the demesne (estate) wall—itself emblematic of English dominance. "REMEMBER 1690" bolsters Unionist resolve by recalling the Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne. "NO SURRENDER" underscores Loyalist resistance to Irish unification. Even the welcoming message to the returning soldiers is a reminder that troops from Ulster fought for Britain and the Empire.

"The Other Side," an even earlier instance of poetry "being instrumental," as Heaney put it in "Frontiers of Writing," "in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world, poetry as an intended intervention into the goings-on of society," is taken from *Wintering Out* (1972). Here a Protestant neighbor of the Heaney family is portrayed. When in the first section of the poem he stands on his bank of the stream dividing his property from theirs, he comments, using the kind of comparison that came naturally to Bible-reading Protestants of an earlier generation, "It's poor as Lazarus, that ground." Standing as he does "where his lea [meadow] sloped/ to meet our fallow," he evidently is, or chooses to be, unaware of the historical circumstances that gave the best land, "his promised furrows," to the British settler ancestors and left the poorer remnants, "our scraggy acres," to the native Irish.

The language is purposely biblical—"a wake of pollen/ drifting to our bank, next season's tares," using the King James version's word for "weeds." For the Catholic children, untutored in the Good Book, this is all exotic. The second section, quoted here in its entirety, shows neatly how stereotypically each community views the other's religious practices:

> For days we would rehearse
> each patriarchal *dictum:*
> Lazarus, the Pharaoh, Solomon
> and David and Goliath rolled
> magnificently, like loads of hay
> too big for our small lanes,
>
> or faltered on a rut—
> 'Your side of the house, I believe,
> hardly rule by the Book at all.'
>
> His brain was a whitewashed kitchen
> hung with texts, swept tidy
> as the body o' the kirk.

The Scottish word for church ("kirk") reminds us of the Protestant settlers' origins. A surprising and even tender moment arrives in the last section of the poem: "sometimes when the rosary was dragging/ mournfully on in the kitchen/ we would hear his step round the gable." The neighbor has dropped by for a visit, but he waits till after-dinner prayers have been said before he announces his presence: "'A right-looking night,'/ he might say, 'I was dandering by/ and says I, I might as well call.'" The poem takes a turn here, because all these years later, the poet, a grown man now, eavesdrops on the eavesdropping neighbor in an imagined moment, where past and present meet:

> But now I stand behind him
> in the dark yard, in the moan of prayers.
> He puts a hand in a pocket
>
> or taps a little tune with the blackthorn
> shyly, as if he were party to
> lovemaking or a stranger's weeping.
>
> Should I slip away, I wonder,
> or go up and touch his shoulder
> and talk about the weather
>
> or the price of grass-seed?

To use a word from the unlovely vocabulary of diplomacy, this is an imagined moment of normalization. The neighbor, in his plain, largely uncomprehending way, is reaching out to "the other side"; Heaney is wondering whether he could do the same.

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But should "normalization" occur, the two sides would hardly be discussing Irish history, with its disputed claims on the land, or the Good Friday Agreement which tries to reconcile those claims. As fellow tillers of the soil, their conversation would instead be of simple matters of common interest.

Like his great predecessor Yeats, Seamus Heaney has taken great pains trying to help define Ireland—which as a political entity dates only from the 1920s, and as a national idea, perhaps only from the nineteenth century. He would probably direct a well-chosen barb at the invocation of Robert E. Lee's remark, "Duty is the noblest word," in relation to his own career. Still, it is clear that he is strongly motivated by duty and conscience, and in "Frontiers of Writing," he put that motive in the context of his generation:

> Among poets of my own generation in the 1960s there was a general feeling of being socially called upon which grew as the polarization grew and the pressure mounted upon the writers not only to render images of the Ulster predicament, but also perhaps to show solidarity with one or other side in the quarrel. Even if they preferred to avoid the redemptive stance, the writers could not altogether escape the myth of their own importance in an ongoing work of definition and transformation.

(These comments precede his discussion of "The Other Side.") At the same time it has always been very clear to me that, temperamentally, Heaney would greatly have preferred not to have been pressed into the role of spokesman or role model. *Field Work* (1979) would seem to be the book where he moves from political work (though by no means can the earlier volumes be seen as purely political) into concerns closer to his heart as a poet. "Oysters," the first poem in the collection, brings pleasure into conflict with social conscience and resolves the conflict surprisingly. Galway oysters are the most delicious I have ever eaten, and with what relish are they celebrated here!

> Our shells clacked on the plates.
> My tongue was a filling estuary,
> My palate hung with starlight:
> As I tasted the salty Pleiades
> Orion dipped his foot into the water.

And yet the pleasure becomes vitiated as Heaney describes the oysters as "Alive and violated" by the "philandering sigh of ocean./ Millions of them ripped and shucked and scattered." One side of him cries out against the luxury of pleasure, while another side glories in it.

Forming an image from classical times—"Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,/ The Romans hauled their oysters south to Rome"—he recoils from the "frond-lipped, brine-stung/ Glut of privilege," and then resolves his ambivalence in a way that releases him from the duality of privilege and victimization. He belongs to neither side, but is, rather, a voice:

> [I] was angry that my trust could not
> repose
> In the clear light, like poetry or freedom
> Leaning in from sea. I ate the day
> Deliberately, that its tang
> Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb.

While *Field Work* has its share of poems concerned with the Troubles, the volume is most notable for the *Glanmore Sonnets*. In the Seventies, Heaney left the North and moved his family across the border to the Republic, where he settled in a cottage in Wicklow and tried to live by his pen. Here, with a sense of release and rebirth, he experienced a unity between the world of farming and the world of letters—in other words, between the world he was born to and the world he has chosen. The analogy gives *Opened Ground* its title: "Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground." These poems nowhere claim that he has done his bit to respond to the conflict in the North and that now he may move on to things closer to his true vocation, but there is a sense of relief here which might imply that.

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Our road is steaming, the turned-up acres
breathe.
Now the good life could be to cross a field
And art a paradigm of earth new from the
lathe
Of ploughs. My lea is deeply tilled.

The meshing of language and place, particularly as regards place-names in Irish, appears years before, in poems like "Anahorish": "*Anahorish*, soft gradient/ of consonant, vowel-meadow,// after-image of lamps/ swung through the yards/ on winter evenings."

But the apotheosis of Heaney's assertion of unity between the world and word comes in "Alphabets," a tour de force written as a Phi Beta Kappa poem during his long tenure as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. This account commences with his first days in grade school: "There he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,/ Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y./ This is writing." A magnificent discourse on language, this acknowledgment of a completed journey climaxes in a memorable image of the astronaut viewing the earth from space:

As from his small window
The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum—

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our name
there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.

Heaney's reminders of the centrality of language obviously differ markedly from the attempts of "language" poets and related theorists who would put the study of poetry under a bell jar where air from the surrounding world cannot touch it. "Alphabets" identifies language as a medium for the growth of a poetic sensibility along the lines of Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

Viewed in the aggregate afforded by this new selection of over four-hundred pages of a life's work, Heaney's work impresses not only for the balance I spoke of at the beginning of this essay, but also by the breadth of its concerns. He has made, not superficially, contributions to an evolving definition of what it means to be Irish, standing up as a voice of sanity in a conflict he would, as I have said, probably prefer not to have been a party to. He has given us a poet's autobiography in which the attendant risks and gains of enlargement are weighed against each other. He has engaged with the ghosts of figures from his past—personal and cultural. By insisting on English language and literature as the full birthright of all who use and extend it, he has enlarged the territory of all literary cultures that have grown and struggled under the sun and shadow of the British Empire. In addition, the poems of love and family—elegies for and reminiscences of his parents, poems that will serve as a legacy for his children—flesh out a life.

My summary of his career makes it all sound so purposeful and well-thought-out! Yet poetry is, *au fond*, a gift—in the double sense that writing is a talent as well as that poetic inspiration comes, ultimately, as an irreducible mystery. Understanding that, the poet is freed somewhat from all the claims on his allegiances that I have touched on, freed into an exhilarating impersonality one can feel in "Postscript," the last poem in the book. Faced with a scene in the west of Ireland that he would like to record but cannot quite, he invokes as a metaphor the wind, which "bloweth where it listeth," as the Gospel of John puts it, "and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth":

Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor
there,
A hurry through which known and strange
things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

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Poems
by Louis Simpson & Wyatt Prunty

The owner of the house

The movers came, and took
her bed, table, everything,
until the house was empty.

She was walking on a road
at night, in a dark dress,
and so she was hit.

A driver who had seen it
said that he thought someone
threw a doll up in the air.

I found some smaller things
that had been overlooked.
A fish made of wood.

A bell, perhaps for calling
a cat. Every night
one comes around and mourns.

A hidden drawer with thread
and needle, thimble, things
as hidden as a heart.

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She let the house run down,
the garden be overgrown,
lost in her arcane studies.

They had to do with the eye
of a fish that she had found
somewhere in Mexico.

A neighbor disconnected
the refrigerator, but did not
think to empty it. Fishes stink.

I open the door of a cabinet,
and forget to close it again—
whack! The side of my head.

"Just to remind you,"
she whispers, "it's my house."
The carpenters are hard at work—

I need more space. She stands
watching a while, and leaves.
She'll have the run of it still.

—Louis Simpson

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Mole

For weeks he's tunneled his intricate need
Through the root-rich, fibrous, humoral dark,
Buckling up in zagged illegibles
The cuneiforms and cursives of a blind scribe.

Sleeved by soft earth, a slow reach knuckling,
Small tributaries open from his nudge—
Mild immigrant, bland isolationist,
Berm builder edging the runneling world.

But now the snow, and he's gone quietly deep,
Nuzzling through a muzzy neighborhood
Of dead-end-street, abandoned cul-de-sac,
And boltrun from a dead-leaf, roundhouse burrow.

May he emerge four months from this as before,
Myopic master of the possible,
Wise one who understands prudential ground,
Revisionist of all things green;

So when he surfaces, lump-like, bashful,
Quizzical as the flashbulb blind who wait
For color to return, he'll nose our green-
rich air with the imperative poise of now.

—*Wyatt Prunty*

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Letter from Vienna

Quiet alarm, deep foreboding

by Alexander Coleman

Important changes are evident in Vienna these days. When I was there in March, for the first time in my memory, there was a real sense of political turmoil, occasioned by the recent entry into Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel's government of the right-wing Freedom Party, and its putative leader, Mr. Jörg Haider. For the past fifty years, the government, with its chancellors changing every few years, has been made up of an ongoing cozy coalition between the two major parties dominant in the postwar period—the Social Democratic Party (SPOe, known colloquially as "the Reds,") and the Austria People's Party (OEVP, "the Blacks"). Haider and his party have put an end to all that. People are uneasy.

On the surface, things did not seem to have changed in any drastic fashion. The city itself, which counts on its easygoing ways and ample dispensing of *gemütlichkeit* for tourists, does seem to be surreptitiously taking on something of the aluminum-and-glass air of a German city, accompanied by a pretense to efficiency decidedly un-Austrian. Some of the cafés have turned into automobile showrooms or computer salons. The cafés that remain do still contribute to the atmospheric attraction much touted by the ministry of tourism in its brochures. Indeed, the admirable and most definitely unspoken rule of letting all customers remain at their respective tables for as long as they like is still inviolate.

I visited two remarkable museums. The "Collection of Ancient Musical Instruments" in the Hofburg Palace has an ingenious audio feature. As you approach with earphones one of the glass cases containing a particular set of old instruments, what seems to be a short-distance FM broadcast of these same instruments being expertly played fills the ear. As you move on and approach another family of instruments, be they a consort of viols, sackbuts, klappentrumpets, serpents or waldhorns, the music just heard fades away and the instruments you are now approaching begin to sound. In this way, the viewer/listener has the freedom to move back, forth, and around, and is not condemned to a one-way tour imposed by a cassette tape.

The Jewish Museum of the City of Vienna, on the Dorotheergasse, just down from the auction house called the Dorotheum (where the flotsam of old Vienna is on view in all its kitschy glory), is a moving documentation of the fate of Jewry in Vienna over the centuries, from the founding of the first ghetto in the thirteenth century through assimilation in the nineteenth and early twentieth, and on to the 1938 *Kristallnacht* and the subsequent genocidal deportations and the razing of the principal temples in Vienna.

The city must be the most compact and accessible tourist site in Europe. As is well known to any reader of Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, the Emperor Franz Josef ordered the ring of

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fortress walls torn down in 1857 and a grand series of monumental buildings constructed in their place, resulting in what is now the opera, the parliament, the city hall, the university, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, etc. As Schorske pointed out, the monumentality of these edifices was clearly designed to belittle the spectator/citizen and magnify the glory of crown and empire. But the point is, the old fortress walls held the city in for so long, that the result was an extraordinarily compact and concentrated center of town. The tram (#1) circling the Ring now takes some twenty-five minutes to complete one circumferential tour. From my hotel on the ParkRing just across from the gilded Johann Strauss memorial in the Stadtpark, the Opera is a twelve-minute walk, the Musikverein (home of the Vienna Philharmonic) a mere ten minutes, the Konzerthaus (with two chamber halls and a large orchestral hall) eight minutes. Though I was certainly not looking for one, I did not happen upon a single movie house within the center of the city.

As one would expect, the abundance of musical performances was extraordinary, though, perhaps out of happenstance, visiting artists dominated the scene—Murray Perahia's recital featuring a very un-Gouldian performance of the "Goldberg Variations," heavily-pedaled and almost romantic, a stunning concert of Bartok and Beethoven quartets by the Vermeer Quartet, a wild and woolly performance by Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra of works by György Ligeti and Olivier Messiaen. The intensity of silence amidst an audience in Vienna during musical performances is a phenomenon not to be duplicated anywhere else, certainly not New York. Again, maybe it was just chance, but it was difficult to erase the memory of past performances heard in these same halls—Klemperer's unforgettable *German Requiem* of Brahms (the conductor half-paralyzed from a stroke and looking for all the world like Mozart's "stone guest"), Von Karajan directing the B Minor Mass of Bach, and his haunting concert of Palestrina masses at ten A.M. at the Opera House one Sunday morning in the early Sixties.

At the same Vienna State Opera, it was heartening and reassuring to see and hear Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* done with such blistering intensity. The leading role was sung by Franz Grundheber, who has already set down his reading of the role in the splendid recording directed by Claudio Abbado. The role of Marie was passionately sung—close to hysteria—with a sultry stage presence by Deborah Polaski in her Vienna debut. A few evenings later, I saw an equally intense *Otello* featuring Kristjan Johansson as Otello, of whom much more will be heard, and the veteran Renato Bruson as Iago. A singer I had not heard before, Adrianna Pieczonka, was a superb Desdemona. It is good to be reminded that the splendid orchestral playing at the Vienna State Opera is due above all to the fact that the Vienna Philharmonic is the pit orchestra for every performance. The subtlety of sound and the way they listen to each other explain in good measure why the musical results are always so distinguished, night after night.

In the end, the spectacle of Vienna and its not-so-distant past is daunting, even overwhelming. It is a repeatedly observed irony that the city that drove out Freud and most certainly hounded out Arnold Schoenberg is the same city that now celebrates these two seminal figures with splendid memorial museums. Gustav Mahler said it all less than a century ago with an anguished rhetorical question: "Do you really have to be dead in Austria before they'll let you live?"

In my previous visits, I hadn't taken in the Freud Museum at Berggasse 19, and it is impossible to do justice in a few words to the scrupulous care for iconographic detail that the Freud apartment now offers to the inquiring observer. More revealing from my point of view as a music lover was the recently opened Arnold Schoenberg Center, not described in even the most recent guide books I have consulted. It is located at the lower part of the grand Schwarzenberg Platz, Zaunergasse 1-3, just to the left of the

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monstrous memorial to the Russian Army erected during the Soviet occupation. (This dreadful thing is thankfully not illuminated at night and, moreover, is obscured by a seventy-foot jet spray which ever so artfully makes it disappear). The Schoenberg Center displays a detailed re-creation of Schoenberg's working office transported from his home in Los Angeles, and a complete library of Schoenbergiana, including a representative selection of his paintings. A particular matter of interest is the detailed scrutiny of the Kandinsky/Schoenberg relationship contained in a special exhibition —not only a rich selection of Kandinsky's paintings, but also a magnificent sampling of work done by his contemporaneous Russian colleagues that up to now had lain forgotten in the cellars of the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg. An informative slide show with narration, showing key declarations from the Kandinsky/Schoenberg correspondence, demonstrates how both artists saw in each other a symbiosis of interests, glimpsing the music and the painting of the future.

I was fortunate to be invited to an informal supper in the apartment of the Argentine novelist Victoria Slavuski, whose name I knew from her discerning article on Borges, "The Old Man and the City," published in the *Times Literary Supplement* last August. A crash course in Austrian politics ensued until the wee hours, and of course the name of Jörg Haider was never far from the preoccupations of this friendly group of United Nations employees, journalists, and one member of the Austrian foreign ministry. I was reminded that Austria now has the highest percentage of aliens of any country in the European Union, and that the coalition between "Reds" and "Blacks" had unravelled in the last election, giving Haider's party 27 percent of the vote, when he had started a decade or so ago with only a fringe of 4 percent at most.

A common theme throughout the evening was the fact that, although xenophobia, anti-Socialist stances, and veiled Nazi sympathies were characteristic of Haider in some of his most virulent public declarations, the voters who had split off from the other two parties had little interest in his ideology, though this seems to be the sole point of interest on the part of American and other European observers. Rather, Haider represents the essence of the politically incorrect in Austria today; he is a sworn enemy of the "Proporz" system established just after the war, whereby "Reds" and "Blacks" controlled practically all state jobs in Austria—post office, ministries, education, medicine, etc. Without a party card, there was no employment, just as in the Iron Curtain countries. Something of a sinister yuppie, Haider is a computer and physical fitness fanatic garbed in designer jeans who drives a sleek Porsche—a veritable bull in the Austrian porcelain shop. Always to be kept in mind is the fact that he is still governor of Carinthia, well-known as the most chauvinist and nationalistic of provinces, nestled on the border with Slovenia and the first reception center for refugees from the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, he has learned quickly from certain pages of contemporary American political history. Indeed, his "Contract With Austria" asks for frugality, reduction in taxes, more incentives for business, an end to early retirement, elimination of the national debt, defense of national sovereignty in relation to the bureaucrats in Brussels and the European Union as a whole, restrictions on immigration, deregulation, and privatization, and market reforms to encourage entrepreneurship—quite necessary considering that the Austrian state still owns the telephone company and the main tobacco corporation.

In early February, the European Union imposed sanctions on the government headed by Chancellor Schüssel solely on the grounds of his dalliance with the Freedom Party. These sanctions entail suspension of normal diplomatic communication, pro forma reception of its diplomats, and no support on behalf of Austrian candidates for international appointments. It is not clear on what legal basis the EU has proceeded in

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the way that it has. The BBC man in Vienna, Angus Roxburgh, noted that "the EU is on thin ice in imposing sanctions on the fear of future violations rather than because of any infractions in the new government's programme." There have been no violations, everyone is on his best behavior. The whole process has been a model of democratic elections and the usual deal-making. Furthermore, there is no "let-out" clause in the sanctions that defines what Austria must do in order to bring the sanctions to an end. My conversants that evening were sorely divided on the matter of the EU move. On the one hand, a minority felt that since all procedures were above board and the elections absolutely untainted, a preventive sanction such as this, treating Austria like a "Teheran" or "Milosević," will in the end produce an adverse reaction in the country, and give more power and martyrdom to Haider and his party. On the other hand, most in the room felt that the move by the EU was a needed blunderbuss shot across the bow of Schüssel's ship of state, and aimed also at any other European country or leader that might be contemplating a serious collaboration with the extreme right. In that sense, it was welcome. But there is a feeling of quiet alarm and a deep sense of foreboding.

Some amelioration may be found in attitudes and actions of a few wild cards within the Freedom Party, though under Haider's brusque and authoritarian dominance, they are increasingly rare. The candidate for the powerful finance post put forth by the party, but not Haider's choice, is the now approved Karl-Heinz Grasser, thirty-one years old, a cool free-marketer with rimless glasses and natty cravats, a character eons away from the thuggish populism of Haider. Just recently, Haider resigned as head of his party, but this move is seen as a ploy to remove the party from the barrage of attacks that he and his closest associates have brought down upon it. The general feeling is that he is still pulling all the strings from his redoubt in Klagenfurt, Carinthia.

It is not lost on any observer that Haider himself is resolutely anti-intellectual, and a vituperative opponent, for instance, of the Burgtheater producing one of the late Thomas Bernhard's last plays, an excoriation of Austria entitled *Heldenplatz*. He is against governmental subsidies of the arts in principle. Obviously there are cultural implications here—the director of the heavily subsidized Salzburg Festival, Gérard Mortier, had handed in his resignation, but just lately retracted it in paradoxical protest against the government's alliance with the Freedom Party. He says that he is henceforth going to carry out a cultural offensive in Salzburg for the remainder of his contract. The dramatist Elfriede Jelinek, object of more than a few tirades from Haider, has now declared that under no circumstances can her work be presented in Austria until the coalition with Haider and his party has been dissolved. I arrived just one month too late to attend the anti-Haider demonstration on February 19th in the Heldenplatz, the same locale where Hitler had harangued the crowds after the Anschluss some sixty-two years ago. A highly motivated throng of 300,000 Austrians gathered against the coalition with Haider.

Something of a paralysis or a standoff now is in place. The EU, during its so-called "dot.com" summit in Lisbon, tried to keep Chancellor Schüssel from the customary group photo taken after the deliberations. According to the *International Herald Tribune*, the Portuguese prime minister "found a diplomatic way out by organizing a group photograph with President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, who attended the summit to sign a free-trade agreement with the EU." In this photograph, Schüssel is seen standing next to Tony Blair, who in turn seems engaged in a scrutiny of the clouds, his head resolutely turned away from the Austrian. Such antics are bound to continue.

A Vienna friend told me of a graffito recently seen: "Knowledge pursues me, but I am faster." Haider is fast on his feet also. The only question for Austria is, will knowledge ever catch up to him?

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Theater

Period decadence, emotional truths

by Mark Steyn

Life upon the wicked stage, wrote Oscar Hammerstein, ain't nothin' like a girl supposes. I'll say. Seventy years on, as if to underline the futility of theatrical aspirations, there now seems to be a distinct actuarial disadvantage. A couple of years back, it was Jonathan Larson dying on the eve of his triumph with *Rent*. Last month, the author of *James Baldwin: A Soul on Fire* could have woken up and read a rave review in the *Times* of his first major New York production. Unfortunately, he didn't wake up at all: he had fallen into a coma and died later that day. Howard Simon was thirty-seven, more or less the same age as Larson.

When the fates play a trick most contemporary dramatists would recoil from using, it's tempting to ponder what they mean by it. In 1980, when Gower Champion, with the impeccable timing that characterized his best work, expired a few hours before the curtain rose on the premiere of *42nd Street*, it was an apt if freakish finale to a splendid career. In the New York theater these days, the final curtain is as likely to fall during previews—as if to say abandon hope all ye who enter here. In the case of Larson, we were supposed to have been robbed—of another dozen great shows that this promising young man would have written. I didn't think so: *Rent* was like Meredith Willson's *Music Man*—one of those shows that feels like the only show the guy has in him and that he, in turn, has poured everything into. He may go on, as Willson did, to write other works on other subjects, but never with the same commitment and identification.

Simon, though, is a different case. On the evidence of his play (produced by the New Federal Theater at Abrons Art Center), he would have enjoyed a dogged career of respectable productions that never quite ignite into hits. *James Baldwin: A Soul on Fire* pushes all the right buttons, sometimes crassly so. The play is set in 1963, as Baldwin and his fellow activists Lena Horne, Lorraine Hansberry, and Harry Belafonte are preparing to meet with Robert F. Kennedy. Baldwin is all of a tizzy, for RFK is, as he says, "so manly." But matters are complicated by an ill-advised bit of rough trade from the night before who's kidnapped the author's latest manuscript and is demanding a big payoff. This is a typical Equity-scale production in our turn-of-the-century theater: two actors, one of whom plays Baldwin while the other mops up everyone else—from Lena Horne to Huey Newton, not to mention a one-man chorus cum *deus ex machina* called Ethereal. I suppose Simon, like all other budding playwrights, knew enough not to write a play requiring six actors, but, as so often nowadays, the character of Ethereal and the requirement of Forrest McClendon to play Everyone But Baldwin seem like devices—they don't arise organically from the material.

Simon has the benefit of a winsome central performance by the Baldwin-like

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Charles Reese, which helps mitigate the often suffocating, manipulative tone of Chuck Patterson's production. This Baldwin sings and coerces the audience into clapping along until we are one united, life-affirming congregation. To be honest, I was probably the only one who needed to be coerced. But then I resent clapping along at *Riverdance*. It seems even more inappropriate at a play—unless it has a very specific function, as in *Peter Pan*, where our applause is needed—"Do you believe in fairies, boys and girls?"—in order to restore Tinkerbell to life. I think it safe to say that, if you don't believe in fairies, you're unlikely to be at a play about James Baldwin. But, even so, in most dramas the happy-clappy routine has a faintly fascistic whiff about it—you have to be very strong-willed indeed to sit on your hands—and it's used as an unearned shortcut—a way of announcing the character's virtue rather than persuading you of it. In a similar vein, a film image of the real Baldwin is projected on to the stage. And even the title, *James Baldwin: A Soul on Fire*, sounds more like a book than an evening of drama.

These are not the faults of the late Mr. Simon so much as the theatrical culture in which he hoped to make his name. Indeed, the New York theater would not see any of the above as faults at all. It may well be the case, as we're often told, that systemic racism and homophobia are so deeply ingrained in America that we need to have plays on the same handful of subjects for the next millennium or three. But if I were to offer any advice to the students at NYU's graduate writing program, where Mr. Simon learned his craft from the likes of Tony Kushner, it would be this: write what you *don't* know. This is, apart from anything else, a commercial judgment—the black and gay markets are pretty crowded these days—but it offers artistic benefits, too. One reason for the death of the American straight play must surely be because so many are as parochial and self-absorbed as the conversation at the adjoining table in a downtown restaurant.

Consider, by way of contrast, Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (at the Royale). Like Simon and that 1963 meeting with Robert Kennedy, Frayn has been struck by a small historical incident: in 1941, when most of Europe was under German rule, Werner Heisenberg, the head of the Reich's nuclear program, paid a short visit to occupied Copenhagen to look up his old mentor, Niels Bohr. That one verifiable fact is really all Frayn has to go on. No one knows what transpired during that trip, but, for a good playwright, that's all the more fun. Frayn likes to make connections: in this instance, Heisenberg was already at work on a German atomic bomb; Bohr would soon be whisked out of the Reich and on to the U.S., where he worked on the Manhattan Project. So the question is: what would two Nobel-winning scientists with a shared interest in nuclear fission find to talk about in 1941? Heisenberg could have obtained some essential information from Bohr. Did he ask? Did Bohr, a Danish Jew (half-Jew, actually, though the Reich did not disdain fractions), find a way to avoid telling him? Or was Heisenberg only willing to go so far to help Hitler to victory? Did he go out of his way not to ask what he needed to know? Did he perhaps urge Bohr to warn the Allies that the Germans were also on the case? Was he seeking his teacher's blessing for the apocalyptic work on which he was engaged? Or was he only there, as Bohr's wife Margrethe sneers, to show off?

What we have here then is a work of speculation, in which the goodguy/badguy roles don't come preassigned and on which the end of the war may hang, and thereby the postwar world in which we live. As Frayn acknowledges, he's not the first to seek parallels between Heisenberg's work and his life. David Cassidy did so in his biography *Uncertainty*. (I assume this is not the same David Cassidy who was once a teen heartthrob with the Partridge Family, and whose solo hit "How Can I Be Sure?," seems with hindsight to be in a Heisenbergian vein.) It's an interesting idea for a play . . . On second thought, scrub that last sen-

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tence: Among his other achievements here, Frayn, a playful linguist, demonstrates how worthless the word "interesting" is as an adjective. So let's look at it this way: when critics bemoan the decaying of Broadway into Disneyfied mega-spectacles, they usually miss the point. At the heart of most satisfying theater is something big. That doesn't mean you need *Miss Saigon*'s helicopter to express it. But even a small three-handed bare-set play ought to have something big at its core.

Here, Frayn, hitherto a funnyman best known for the farce *Noises Off*, is venturing into Tom Stoppard territory—exploring little corners of history's vast sweeping canvas. Like Stoppard with *Arcadia* and *Hapgood*, he's been accused with this play of being too cool and cerebral, but, if the alternative is feeling good about clapping along with James Baldwin, Fraynian cool offers a greater likelihood that there might be an outbreak of . . . drama. And so it proves. *Copenhagen* is on Broadway, but his set is as sparse as Howard Simon's—just three chairs in a kind of lecture-hall limbo, round which the protagonists prowl as they explore Frayn's various versions of historical truth. His conclusion is an extrapolation of Heisenberg's famous Uncertainty Principle about the movement of electrons into a general theory on the "uncertainty at the heart of things." The straightforward geographic title of *Copenhagen* gives us a clue to what drew Frayn to the story: the scientific world's Uncertainty Principle man comes to Denmark, home of the man who symbolizes drama's Uncertainty Principle: Hamlet. Frayn has combined these twin strands into a great rumination on the certainties of science, and the uncertainties of the human motivations that drive it.

I first saw *Copenhagen* in London on the National Theatre's smallest stage—the Cottesloe, where Michael Blakemore's production pulled off a wonderful dual effect, conveying both a very immediate intimacy and the sense of huge forces pressing in from the world outside. You expect some of that to be lost in Blakemore's restaging for a Broadway house, but what's more surprising is how much is retained. Much of that is due to three terrific performances—Michael Cumpsty as the torn Heisenberg, Philip Bosco and Blair Brown as the affable Mr. and Mrs. Bohr. They manage to convey both the immense ordinariness of lowly figures caught up in a great war and the extraordinary genius on which the outcome of that war may depend. As in Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Frayn's *Copenhagen* uses scientific principles to illuminate emotional truths—and, aside from physics, history, and philosophy, the play is suffused in primal human feelings: Bohr has lost two children and hopes in Heisenberg for a surrogate son. There is, in theory, no reason why an Englishman of Frayn's background should be any more interested in a Dane and a German getting together in 1941 than a New York playwright would be. Are the defining events of the modern world of no interest to American dramatists?

Ah, well. There's always the old favorites close to home—like the Jazz Age. You know how it is. You wait ages for one *Wild Party* and then two come along all at once. As if to remind us of the ever lengthening odds on the Great White Way, we now have a Broadway first: two flop versions of the same source material in one season. *The Wild Party* version one showed up in February, *The Wild Party* version two arrived in April. Disappointing those of us who'd been looking forward to chaos at Ticketmaster and the Times Square half-price booth, the first *Wild Party* closed down about a week before the second opened, which may well be gone by the time you read this. At this point one has to resist the urge to indulge in cheap Lady Bracknell quips. Both *Wild Parties* are based on Joseph Moncure March's 1928 poem, a hymn to "gin, skin, sin, fun," which languishes in obscurity for a couple of decades now and then but usually manages to re-emerge: there was a film with Raquel Welch in the Seventies, and an illustrated reprint by Art Spiegelman a couple of years back,

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which happened to catch simultaneously the respective eyes of two different adaptors. I had fond hopes of some Grouchoesque lawsuit:

> "In the party of the first party the part of the second party animal departs only partly from the part of the first partygoer in the party of the second party, in the part where the partly parturient partier is parting from the party . . ."
>
> "You should have been at the party of the third party. We don't start previews until fall 2001."

Anyway, *Wild Party* I (at the Manhattan Theatre Club) and *Wild Party* II (a New York Shakespeare Festival production at the Virginia) have several things in common. Both are solo efforts—WPI has book, music and lyrics by Andrew Lippa; WPII has book, music and lyrics by Michael John LaChiusa (though he's had a little help on the book from George C. Wolfe): in a collaborative field, one-man musicals are few and far between, and for good reason. But in both cases inspiration struck in much the same way—with the author cruising the bookshelves and coming across a slim volume which began: "Queenie was a blonde, and her age stood still/ And she danced twice a day in vaudeville"—which is hard to resist. Both Lippa and LaChiusa retain the lines for the openings of their respective versions, but neither setting adds anything more to the words than you gain from reading them on the printed page. Lippa's version is closer to conventional songwriting, though composers are never very good setters of texts. LaChiusa's setting is part of some two-chord seesaw he's got going, which presumably is meant to sum up some character dichotomy, or the two forces tearing at Queenie, or whatever: it's one of those ideas that explain better than they play. But both settings fail to imbue the text with any additional resonances, and they raise the same nagging question: what are you adding to this work by musicalizing it?

Before *The Wild Party*, Joseph Moncure March was the first managing editor of *The New Yorker*. Afterwards, he went to Hollywood and wrote *Hell's Angels*, with Jean Harlow as a cleaned-up Queenie, and *Madam Butterfly*, with Cary Grant as Pinkerton. He's one of those little-known figures who gets to make up the numbers in the group shots of well-known ones—such as, to pluck at random from the March résumé, John Wayne and Robert Frost. *The Wild Party*, however, is the one thing that's undeniably his: lots of people wrote for *The New Yorker* and motion pictures, but the ranks of Jazz Age epic versifiers are considerably thinner. In the summer of 1926, he sat down to bash out a narrative poem about "a lot of people getting drunk at a party." The result is a gin-sodden, chipped-nailed view of *la vie bohème*, set in the Manhattan home of Queenie and her cocksure honey Burrs and celebrating the endless possibilities of social and sexual boundary-crossing. Among those slumming at Queenie's flat is Black, a fellow who

> made you think of squash rackets
> And dinner jackets
> And had that air of poise without pose
> That only a well-bred person shows.

March frequently lapses into doggerel, which is fine by me considering that doggerel at least depends on a sense of meter and rhyme. But he has a vivid eye for the minutiae of the low life. The guests at the wild party are the types you'd expect, and then some: two Jewish producers; an ex-prizefighter and his girlfriend's jailbait sister; a lesbian and her catatonic protegé; an "ambisextrous" lit-crit purpose gal; and, of course, two incestuous gay brothers—what party would be complete without a pair of those?

It's the sort of material that on first reading leaps up and says, "You know, there's a pretty good musical in all of this." Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* does the same, so does virtually the entire F. Scott Fitzgerald oeuvre. Much of that's due to the fact that, unlike, say, Chekhov, these are charac-

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ters you can picture with music: indeed, they seem to exist in a world where music is permanently in the background—from the phonograph, the piano, the dance orchestra. But, generally speaking, material that's so obviously musical doesn't gain much from being actually musicalized.

Period decadence, however, is in these days. And, when Lippa's and LaChiusa's scripts landed on the desks at the MTC and the Public Theater, I've no doubt the chaps who make the decisions cried, "Aha! This will be our *Cabaret*, our *Chicago*, our *Fosse*!" *Wild Party* II wastes no time in advertising its derivativeness. For example, we first glimpse Mandy Patinkin in blackface, eye-rolling like Jolson. Patinkin, who on good days can effortlessly out-ham Jolson, doesn't really need burnt cork, but he's blacked up because George C. Wolfe has a bold directorial "concept." His concept is—wait for it—to stage the evening as a vaudeville, complete with scene cards at the side of the stage. But hang on, isn't *Chicago* also staged as a vaudeville? Ah, yes, but in this instance Wolfe has chosen to have his characters played as cheesey hand-me-down versions of stars of the period. But just a minute, isn't that exactly what *Chicago* does? The actors come out and do little turns as Helen Morgan atop the piano and so forth? True, but Wolfe has picked different stars—not Helen Morgan but Helen "Boop-boop-a-doop" Kane, Josephine Baker, Valentino, etc.

Wild Party I had an almost demented desire to be grimey and authentic, going so far as to install a toilet on stage and, in the evening's most theatrical moment, using it. The accompanying cascade was the work of either an amazingly lifelike sound effect or an alarmingly resourceful actress, but, at any rate, it was the equivalent of Mary Martin's shampoo scene in *South Pacific*: from "I'm Going To Wash That Man Right Out Of My Hair" to "I'm Going To Urinate That Man Right Into My Toilet" in a mere half-century. Anyway, wherever else it might be, *Wild Party* II is not in the can. Instead, from the moment it begins its stylized posturing, it chiefly reminds you of how exhausted the "concept musical" is. *Chicago* is a vaudeville. *Cabaret* is a cabaret. *Follies* was an old-style follies (which Patinkin himself did at Lincoln Center a decade or so back). Do we really need any more familiar stories told in antiquated showbiz forms? And, to give them their due, *Wild Party* II's illustrious predecessors at least set up a certain creative tension between content and form: *Chicago* is about a murder trial, *Cabaret* the rise of Nazism, *Follies* the sterility of marriage. But what on earth is the point of staging a wild party as a vaudeville?

Wild Party II has been put together by the best Broadway talent available—Robin Wagner sets, Jules Fisher lighting—but everything about it, from the framing to the acting, is labored: watching Patinkin and Toni Collette and Eartha Kitt struggle to lift the material to life, you marvel at how decadent abandon has never seemed so forced and strained. When even Miss Kitt, despite monumental effort, cannot steal a show, you know it's not worth trying. Two thoughts arise: how much longer can the Public Theatre stagger on under George C. Wolfe's inept leadership, both artistic and operational? And what's with Michael John LaChiusa? In an age when even proven Broadway names struggle for years to get their shows on, this guy's had five major productions in no time at all—and all five have been flops. With LaChiusa, the old Broadway saw—"Nobody likes him but the public"—has been stood on its head: everybody likes him except the public—and yet, for no good reason, no New York season is now complete without one (and this year two) of his arid, anal, ersatz-operatic scores. In defiance of the conventional wisdom that it's impossible to make a career in the musical theater, the great LaChiusa is produced more frequently than Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, you name 'em. Wherever they are now, Jonathan Larson and Howard Simon can only marvel.

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Art

Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

John Heliker, who died this Spring in his nineties, had his first show at Kraushaar Galleries in 1945. His last, "A State of Seeing,"[1] was the gallery's first devoted exclusively to the artist's drawings. While Heliker was of the same generation as de Kooning and Pollock, and formed close friendships with Philip Guston and Walker Evans, he was also, as Jed Perl notes in his catalogue essay, "not an easy artist to place." Even so, the thirty-eight drawings on view at Kraushaar comprise a brew wafting with the scents of early eighteenth-century French influences mixed with a particularly mid-twentieth century American expressivity. His *Don Giovanni, Two Figures* has the on-the-spot immediacy of a Watteau sketch though without the older artist's solidity and precisely rendered details; Heliker drew only the figures, providing no background and thus no context, nor has he included facial features. *Ronda*, oppositely, couples a craggy, romantic landscape with an aqueduct or railroad bridge to form a distinctly neoclassical vista.

Aside from the one drawing of actors, the works are portioned almost equally among interiors, still lifes, landscapes, and portraits. When he used pencil, Heliker pressed lightly, resulting in a jumpy and ebullient line. In charcoal, his line is fuzzier and darker, describing forms rather than particulars. Heliker seems to have been afflicted with deliquescent perceptions, which he then tried to fix on paper; the drawings have an evanescent quality, like tomb rubbings made on extremely worn stone. The title *Vase of Flowers with Suggested Room* captures his method perfectly: he presents one object, one fact, and tends only to suggest the others. Some of the landscapes are composed of but the barest of marks. In *Maine Coast*, a charcoal on paper, the scratches and lines describing the foreground are extremely similar to those delineating the clouds. A few lines establish the horizon, faint shading forms a hill. His is a vision decomposing into nothingness, yet it holds one's attention because it is as lovely and fleeting as a mirage. By conjoining these eccentric marks, Heliker entirely avoided illustration in his drawings. His figures have scant volume, and his shading obscures as much as it bodies. When he wanted to, though, Heliker could draw with precision and vigor. The stove in *Interior with Figure and Stove* has a cast-iron density and a dark smudge makes up the figure's torso. Yet these tangible elements occupy the same space as eerily transparent objects, like the two tables which are drawn only in outline, allowing one to see through and behind them to the floor. *Interior with Piano* has the closeness, warmth, and diffuse feeling of an intimist's domestic scene. Then again, the artist fastens on the integrity of

1 "A State of Seeing: Drawings of John Heliker" was on view at Kraushaar Galleries, New York, from March 18–April 15, 2000.

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planes and volumetric columns, on the rectilinear forms of the piano and the door to its left, and on the circular forms of the piano stool and the table leaf hanging down in the background.

Heliker's technique is especially suited to the tracing of emotion. The eyes and posture in *Self Portrait with Hat* turn from the lower right up to the left on a diagonal, while the linear shading occurs on the opposite diagonal, from lower left to upper right, producing a strong torsional movement that evokes similarly strong emotions. Nevertheless, the face itself seems reserved, cautiously inquisitive. Heliker's inquisitiveness comes across, too, in the drawings as a whole, fueled by what Perl calls their "diaristic element," the sense that these are the cullings of a restlessly searching sensibility. No mean feat, still to be searching, and searching fruitfully, in one's nineties.

"Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art,"[2] was guest curated by Justin Spring to accompany his recent biography of the artist, which, while gorgeously illustrated with high-quality reproductions of Porter's canvases, largely eschews the sort of substantive art historical analysis that one expects from a scholarly biography published by the Yale University Press. Unfortunately, in the book Spring does not restrict himself even to the details of Porter's life; he also makes tendentious pronouncements about the artist's sexuality. Long passages are devoted to Porter's relationship with the poet James Schuyler, passages that might have been more fruitfully given over to an examination of, say, the relationship between Porter's work and his friend Willem de Kooning's, or to Vuillard's influence. And, while Spring relies heavily on well-known memoirs of life in Greenwich Village in the Forties and Fifties to set the cultural mise-en-scène, he says almost nothing about Porter's reaction to the work of his brother, the photographer Eliot Porter—perhaps because neither brother left writings on the subject from which to crib.

Merely by exhibiting a large group of his paintings, the show succeeds where the book does not, emphasizing Porter's work while using biography as an organizing principle instead of as a laboratory for Spring's prurient speculations. Still, Spring makes some confusing curatorial choices. The show begins and ends in a resolutely chronological manner, piling on photographs, letters, early drawings, books, and magazines relating to Porter's life, as well as a tape loop playing Rudy Burchardt's short film *A Day in the Life of a Cleaning Woman*, in which Porter and his wife Anne had starring roles. However, most of the paintings hang in two central rooms grouped by genre—still lifes, portraits, and landscapes—though the wall text continues to offer biographical snippets, attesting to Spring's inability to see the paintings as anything other than illustrative byproducts of the life. What storytelling can never do is explain the curiously enduring appeal of the paintings themselves.

A mediocre Sunday poet and first-rate art critic, Porter was an enormously cultured man, and the apparently straightforward realism of his canvases belies their sophistication. Take *Apples and Roses* (1967), a potentially humdrum still life energized by the contrast between its virtually abstract background and the more objectively resolved foreground pulsing with reds, pinks, light blues, yellows, grays, and browns. In his best works, he knew exactly how much voltage was necessary to electrify his subject. "Energy," Porter once wrote, "is the bridge to whatever is essential." *The Table* (1970), a late watercolor, holds clusters of objects in loose tension, with broad passages of peach-toned tablecloth between them. The arc of the table's edge divides the blank upper fifth of the canvas from the arrangement below, again exploiting the interplay of an abstract ground with instances of heightened realism. Of the portraits, the

2 "Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art" opened at AXA Gallery, New York, on March 23, 2000 and remains on view until May 27.

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most engaging establish a rhythm between forms, patterns, and colors. In *Anne* (1965), a homey, frontal portrait of the artist's wife seated on a chair, the rhythm originates in the horizontal lines of the siding behind the sitter, which stand in counterpoint to the numerous vertical lines formed by Anne's back, arms, and legs, the edges of her cardigan, and the legs of the chair. These linear rhythms suggest the faintest ghost of a grid upon which another, chromatic rhythm strikes up: her powder-blue sweater playing against the gray-blue floor boards that abut the whiter gray of the wall.

As a self-described follower of Bonnard and Vuillard, Porter excelled in painting domestic interiors. It is the distinction of this show to have brought together his three most celebrated contributions to the genre. A depiction of Porter's two daughters in the family's summer residence on Great Spruce Head Island, Maine, *Interior with Dress Pattern* (1969), with its receding corridors punctuated by brilliantly lit windows, and its casual arrangement of children among strewn furniture, recalls seventeenth-century Dutch interiors, particularly in the meticulous attention paid to the smallest details. *The Screen Porch* (1964)—actually a sort of partial interior—creates a marvelous feeling of disquiet by placing Anne outside the porch looking in on her two daughters, the eldest standing nervous and distracted, holding two fingers of her right hand in her left, the younger looking over her shoulder at James Schuyler, who sits in a chair, serenely reading. Porter turned to Velázquez in composing *The Mirror* (1966), in which Porter's daughter Elizabeth faces the viewer from a chair in front of a large, square mirror reflecting a rear view of Elizabeth as she looks at her father, who stands between a tall window and a wood stove. Each of these three canvases marshals complex compositional arrangements and highly chromatic palettes to achieve the pictorial energy Porter espoused. That they also portray scenes from the artist's life in no way recommends the biography. The paintings do quite well on their own.

On a cursory viewing, Thomas Nozkowski's paintings appear as competent, attractive, diminutively sized abstractions, which is exactly why they deserve more than a brief look. Nozkowski is a master of variation with a wonderfully imaginative grasp of plastic form and color. His new work, all from the last year, adds much needed vitality to the virtually static genre of abstract painting. Each of the thirteen untitled oils that were on view at Max Protetch in February and March[3] has its own, discrete appeal, though one suspects that, because so much depends on the ways in which he modulates the elements from painting to painting, Nozkowski's achievement can be fully appreciated only by seeing a number of his works together.

In the press material, the gallery makes a half-hearted attempt to distract attention from the artist's less-than-trendy formal innovations by imbuing his work with a mysterious symbolism, saying that he transforms "personal narrative into systems of abstract painting." However, the twelve oils on panel-mounted linen and one oil on canvas board reveal no narrative content. Instead each painting seems to address a set of pictorial problems, though Nozkowski's chromatic exuberance and vast resource of forms saves his work from feeling like a series of exercises. While much of the foregrounded imagery recalls Arp and Miró, the rounded, opaquely colored shapes tend to float just in front of either aqueous or muddy grounds of scumbled paint. Beyond the clear distinction of subject and ground, sly overlappings of grid lines and shapes call attention to slightly shallower degrees of depth while holding all the pictorial planes close to the literal surface. In *Untitled (7–137)*, two ovals—one divided by a curving line into blue and maroon areas, the other by a straighter line into darker maroon and lighter blue areas—sit near the top of the panel, above an area of jagged gridwork

3 "Thomas Nozkowski: New Paintings" was on view at the Max Protetch Gallery, New York, from February 19–March 18, 2000.

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composed of strips of black and green paint which vary in width. Three horizontal green strips near the bottom of the panel occupy the same plane as the two ovals, while the diagonal black strips define a somewhat more shallow plane between that of the ovals and the light green wash forming the ground.

Merely describing the ways in which Nozkowski uses grids would require a complete essay. The grids in *Untitled (7–125)* become a wall of bricks in one passage and suggest a window pane in another, the two passages—which again occupy different planes, as emphasized by the receding edge of one of the bricks—are connected by a black Möbius strip-like line; *Untitled (7–127)* employs a grid as shading to set off black and white forms; and in *Untitled (7–139)* the grid forms the background on which fifteen shapes fit together like puzzle pieces. By confounding the depicted planes as well as mixing hard-edged with softer abstract forms, Nozkowski takes his paintings far beyond the purely decorative. These are panels meant to engage the mind and the eye, while the sweep of choices from one panel to another, and from one color to another within each panel, rouses a sustained emotional response in the viewer.

That said, Nozkowski is more than just a formal magician; he also paints with surprising dexterity. For instance, the seemingly flat yellow-green shape on the surface of *Untitled (7–126)* is given subtle dimensions of volume and depth by areas of shading, highlights, and twisting lines. One of the most bewitching works in the show, *(7–126)* has in its center a black rectangle with curved edges (like a highlight removed from a round surface), which pierces the large primary shape and the scumbled ground, at once allowing one a glimpse of abyss and hinting at depths far deeper than the ground itself. In fact, all of the paintings in the show offer similar visual prestidigitations. The real miracle is that such sophisticated and aesthetically realized work can be found in Chelsea.

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Music

Looking about

by Jay Nordlinger

For lovers of singing, this is a happy time. There seems to be no end of fine singers, and two of the best are Deborah Voigt and Susan Graham. Voigt is a soprano from Illinois; Graham is a mezzo-soprano from Texas. Each is about forty years old and in superb form. Each is a favorite of James Levine, music director of the Metropolitan Opera and a powerful patron. Each also does extensive concert and recital work, and has a fruitful recording career. Again, a happy time.

I have written of Deborah Voigt that she boasts "the most refulgent voice before the public today." An oddly specific piece of praise, that. But refulgent her voice is, and opulent, and astounding, and a number of other things. She won the gold medal at the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow and has been particularly triumphant in Wagner and Strauss roles. She is an historic—no less than historic—Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, and an historic Chrysothemis in *Elektra*. On her nights in this latter opera, audiences scream almost to the point of collapse. They do so justly. She was Aida at the Met earlier this year and did not especially distinguish herself; but on the whole, she is as reliable and gratifying as anyone.

In the middle of April, she appeared at Lincoln Center with the New York Philharmonic under its music director, Kurt Masur. To begin was a concert aria of Barber, *Andromache's Farewell*, made famous in a 1963 recording with Martina Arroyo and the conductor Thomas Schippers. The first thing that hits you about Voigt—and probably the second and the third—is the voice. It comes as something of a shock, even if you have heard it before. Quite simply, it is hard to fathom that such a sound is coming from a human being. It is an enormous sound—about as big as voices get—but a beautiful, luxuriant one, not a battle-hardened, rough-and-ready one. Usually, you can have a huge voice or a beautiful one, but not both. Voigt stints on neither quality. There are elements of other singers in her—Ljuba Welitsch, Inghe Borkh, Birgit Nilsson, and Leontyne Price, just to make a short list—but this instrument is entirely her own. While it is a big voice, it is not a heavy one: a critical distinction. There is plenty of light and activity in it. It is also a rather wet or juicy voice, à la Elisabeth Söderström. It can fairly drip with opulence. The saddest thing about Voigt's voice is that it does not record especially well; nothing matches the experience of hearing it in the opera house or concert hall—which is not true of every singer.

In the Barber, Voigt was in total command. There was little effort in her singing; her breathing was easy, her power unforced. Every onset, or beginning of a note, was clean. Her loud singing, of course, was formidable, and her soft singing was excellent, too. In the middle dynamic, she was rather indifferent. I should not forget to add that Voigt succeeded in conveying the character

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and drama of Barber's subject, Andromache. If Voigt did nothing but pour forth sound, she would be valuable; but she is a worthy musician, to boot.

To end the program was the final scene from Strauss's *Salome*, a kind of mad "Liebestod." A little ugliness, believe it or not, is not a bad thing in this music, and at times Voigt was almost too beautiful. As Salome spits out her words, she must be aspish; as she sinks further into madness, she must be disembodied, bleak. Where the score requires bloom—"Nichts in der Welt war so schwarz wie dein Haar"—Voigt was superb; where it requires fragility—"hörte ich geheimnisvolle Musik"—she was unconvincing. The entire scene could have used a dash more dementia. But then, Strauss was in love with the female voice, and he would have swooned for Voigt's. It is very hard for a critic to hail the living—far safer to wait until a musician is dead, or at least retired. But it ought to be said that Voigt has one of the most extraordinary instruments in memory.

It comes as a surprise, not to mention a disappointment, that Voigt's most recent recording is less than satisfying. It should have been a magnificent one: Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, also with Masur and the New York forces (Teldec 25990). The performance is jarringly blunt, lacking in introspection and transport. Voigt was not in particularly good voice on this occasion; some of her middle notes are hard and metallic. There is not enough give, or pliancy, in her singing, or enough variation of color and mood. When she lands juicily on a note, the effect is wonderful; but these songs call for more than voice. Interpretatively, everything is straight-ahead and unreflective. To her credit, Voigt is not a wallower, like Jessye Norman; she has more of the no-nonsense impulse of Eleanor Steber. But a balance should be struck.

An example of Voigt's powers in Wagner can be heard in her 1994 recording of *The Flying Dutchman* with James Levine (Sony Classical 66342). As Senta, Voigt delivers an exemplary account of the "Ballad"—controlled, affecting, and grand. Her opening cries of "Johohoe!" are perfectly executed, and her intonation throughout is rock-solid. She shows, in this performance, that she has cutting power as well as richness of tone; this voice is not merely a pillow; there are some razors within. She will no doubt end her career as Brünnhilde, and she will be impressive; it is a pity, though, that she ever has to abandon the more lyrical roles, for which she is hardly less than ideal.

Susan Graham is no Wagnerian, but she is certainly a Straussian, and a skilled exponent of many other composers as well. She has caused a sensation in two of the great trouser roles, Cherubino and Octavian, both of which she sang at the Met this season. Most pleasing, she is an able, indeed, an exquisite, recitalist, as she proved at Lincoln Center on April 16.

Graham sang from two repertories central to her career, the French and the American. She began with a set of Debussy, which showed off any number of her strengths. Her sound was warm and even, with a bit of mezzo dusk in it; pitch-wise, she was unerring. She sang with her usual dignity and restraint, not trying to paint too much of a picture, content to let Debussy do his work. These songs, properly sung, can have an hypnotic effect, which Graham achieved. She continued with a group both American and French, Barber's *Mélodies passagères*, of which Poulenc was an enthusiast. Graham's singing was beautifully expressive, with just the right emphasis on the text—not an overemphasis, which would have distracted from the music (the main show). In "Tombeau dans un parc," she cast a rare spell. Elsewhere, she exhibited a shimmering upper register. Her breathing was a model for any student, or co-professional, for that matter.

Graham has a particular fondness for Reynaldo Hahn, from whom she sang a generous set, and to whom she has devoted an entire recording (Sony Classical 60168). Her recital Hahn, curiously enough, was superior, both musically and technically, to

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her recorded Hahn. The first offering was the sublime, neo-Baroque "A Chloris." This she rendered with surpassing dignity and tenderness. She used a bit of portamento, or sliding, but nothing tasteless. On the final note, there was a wondrous rising and falling. In the last song of the group, the popular "Printemps," you could have asked for more ecstasy, but Graham's restraint is one of her assets and not to be scolded.

The problem with her disc? Going beyond restraint, it is a little bland, a little cautious, a little plodding. Graham's singing in the recital hall was far more characterful and winsome. Not every musician records as successfully as he performs live and in the flesh, and vice versa. In the matter of French singing, there is a fine line between Gallic cool and outright dullness. At Lincoln Center, Graham was always on the happy side of that line; in her recording, she now and then strays. But these criticisms are directed at a woman whose very excellence asks for high standards. The Hahn disc, over all, is first-rate.

The second half of Graham's program was all American, beginning with four songs of John Musto. Graham works terribly well in the American idiom. The words fit neatly in her mouth, and she has a thoroughly native sensibility. In one Musto song, she seemed a high-class lounge singer. In another, she employed a nice comedic touch, without being obtrusive or hammy. In the memorable "Recuerdo," a setting of the Millay poem, she was insinuating and bluesy. Always, she found the correct expression for the music. She went on to two songs of Bernstein, which were effective, though they revealed one of her slightly annoying habits: she telegraphs her consonants. In "Music I Heard with You," you could hear the initial *m* a mile away. This tendency seems doubly evident on her recordings. She also sang a pair of songs by Lowell Liebermann, a composer not yet forty, and did so with a poignancy that was close to heartbreaking.

Graham closed her recital with a set of Ned Rorem, another composer to whom she has a special attachment, and to whom she has devoted her latest recording (Teldec 80222). The Rorem songs are diverse, neatly crafted, and of consistently high quality. Graham sings them simply, sparely, and clearly—just as required. The encrustations of Europe have been scraped off these American beauties. Graham's singing in this repertory is quintessentially American: scrubbed clean, but not passionless. She sings like the girl next door, if the girl next door could sing. As with her Hahn disc, her Rorem disc is somehow less satisfying than her recital performance—more careful, not as free or natural. Still, it is an undeniable achievement.

If we are lucky, and they look after themselves, we should have Deborah Voigt and Susan Graham with us for another twenty years, at least. They are key parts of what should be regarded as a golden age of singing. Aficionados enjoy complaining about the ones they missed—"Oh, to have heard Patti!"; "Oh, to have heard Ferrier!" etc. But they should not forget, too, to look about them.

Concert note

Martha Argerich
at Carnegie Hall, New York.

It was as much spectacle as concert. Martha Argerich had not given a recital in New York since 1981. She has suffered from a number of problems, physical and otherwise. She is one of the great cancelers in all of music; at one point, concert organizers pretty much gave up on booking her, knowing that they were likely to be disappointed. But the mercurial nature of Argerich's career has merely added to her status. There is an excitement about her that has little to do with music. The infrequency of her appearances, coupled with her prodigious technique, has built a myth.

When she showed up at Carnegie Hall on March 25, the public went mad. The applause that greeted her was thunderous,

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frenzied, as at a rock concert, one imagines. This obviously annoyed Argerich, who was impatient to begin. All through the first half of her program, she played like a woman who was somewhat shocked to be there and who could not wait to get off the stage. She opened with the Partita No. 2 of Bach, in C minor. This was cold, harsh, aggressive Bach, with little lyricism to it. It was also grossly overpedaled, sometimes turning to mush. Argerich jabbed and poked and banged at the keyboard. Nothing was melting or affecting; everything was bulled through, with scant beauty. Seldom do you get both overpedaled *and* harsh—usually it is one or the other. The Courante was especially vulgar, hardly Bach at all. The closing Capriccio was an ordeal to sit through. Not only was it rushed and indistinct, it was pelted with bizarre sforzandos. Argerich is known—justly—as a Prokofiev pianist, but when she brings the qualities of Prokofiev to Bach, she wreaks disaster. In this performance, Bach was the odd man out.

Argerich then assayed a couple of Chopin pieces, the beloved *Barcarolle* and the Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor. The *Barcarolle*, like the Bach, was rushed and impatient, but at least it showed some lyricism and sweep. Argerich, for all her technical skill, is not an interesting pianist coloristically; her palette is rather limited. She did, however, give the *Barcarolle* a stylish ending: calm, limpid, and lovely. Her playing of the Scherzo, as could have been expected, was muscular and thrilling. Even here, though, there was bravura for its own sake, without musical purpose. And as before, there was something cold and heartless about her performance. Argerich did not really finish her phrases; everything was bluntly dispatched. Strange as it may be to say about a lionized pianist, if a student in a conservatory banged away like this—unmusically and heedlessly—he would be kicked out of his teacher's studio.

Argerich concluded the first half of her program with one of her specialties, the Prokofiev Sonata No. 7 in B-flat. This piece, clearly, was meant for Argerich, or she for it. Here at last she got to the guts of the music; it was not merely thrown off. Her percussiveness, her tenseness, her relentlessness—all are welcome in Prokofiev, or at least not harmful. Still, she did not seem completely settled. She allowed far too little space between movements. The final section, Precipitato, had the necessary propulsion, but it was carelessly fast and could have been jauntier, jazzier. Impressive though it was, there was a machine-like quality to it. Here is an important difference between Argerich and one of her teachers, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, who was usually a musician first and a pianist, or technician, second.

The second half of the program, Argerich did in collaboration. The major piece was Schumann's piano quintet, performed with the Juilliard String Quartet. This should be an excellent vehicle for Argerich—it is big, bold, and glorious, a sort of piano concerto with string quartet. But Argerich could not help being Argerich. Her playing was cold and severe, with those jolting and unwanted outbursts of sound. There was no musical thread running through this account; it was skittish, episodic. The second movement, oddly, was too restrained, with the pianist failing to speak up melodically. And the Scherzo was taken at an absurdly fast pace—an unsustainable, indefensible pace. One simply could not hear the music, its character being lost. The final Allegro, too, was fast and loud, but without musical intensity or satisfaction. In all, this performance was a reminder of the importance of basic musical values.

Argerich is a maddening, confusing pianist. Loaded with talent, she repeatedly squanders it. At her best, she is electric, provoking in the listener an almost physical response. At her worst, she is a barbarian, pulverizing the keyboard and killing off music as a result. But she is well worth catching when you can—a phenomenon, for good or ill.

—Jay Nordlinger

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The media

The news from Olympus

by James Bowman

Last month I had the curious experience, which must be much more familiar to the eminences of the journalistic "profession" than it is to me, of becoming part of a story I had attempted to write. In my case, the story was a humble book review. I had been asked by *The Washington Post* to review two books on the Clinton scandals—Jeffrey Toobin's *A Vast Conspiracy* and *The Hunting of the President* by Joe Conason and Gene Lyons, mentioned in this space last month. I don't know why the *Post* asked me. Perhaps it was because I had once written a piece for the TLS in which I had criticized the shortsightedness both of Clinton's admirers and of his detractors. In my review I made a similar point, noting that, although both books had important things to say, both were flawed by excessive partisanship and a willingness to be as credulous towards the Clintons as those they criticized were towards the Clintons' enemies.

Both books were themselves illustrations of what I took to be the one incontrovertible fact to have been established by all the swearings and deposings of the Clinton scandals, which is that opinion on the subject has become so hopelessly polarized as to make it impossible to write anything about them that is not seen by one side as tainted by association with the other. At the end of the review, I added as an illustration—with what I regarded as an elegant turn on a necessary declaration of interest—that Conason and Lyons had disparaged not only the reporting and the motives of the *American Spectator*, for which, as it happens, I write movie reviews, but also its "pretentious, Anglophilic cultural criticism."

Such a gratuitous swipe at the magazine I thought typical of the book's exaggerated partisanship: after bludgeoning yet another Clinton opponent, they couldn't resist giving him a kick in the ribs for good measure. Well, that's partisanship for you, and one's enemies are naturally entitled to dislike one's tie or one's haircut as much as they do one's politics. But making a point of it in this way rather advertises the fact that the partisanship is likely to prevail over calmer, more judicious impulses, as indeed it does in the two books under discussion. Self-evidently, these are street-fighters and not dispassionate observers whose only loyalty is to the truth. Perhaps, indeed, there are no such observers left anymore, no one not in some way seen as committed to one side or the other. That was my point in the review.

And Conason, most obligingly, proceeded to make the same point in his own way by writing and speaking, and encouraging others to write and speak, in protest that someone who also wrote for the *American Spectator* had been chosen to review his book. Rather comically, I thought, Conason protested most vigorously against my having charged his book with partisanship—though Clinton himself subsequently recommended the book at a press conference. Nor did Conason's con-

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cern for his reputation for impartiality stop him from displaying in its advertising a blurb for the book from James Carville (who had so memorably declared "war" on Kenneth Starr), or relying on the help of Sidney Blumenthal's White House e-mailing operation in seconding his complaints about me. What, him partisan?

Conason attacked me and the *Post* in public broadcasts and even telephoned me at home (the first time *that's* ever happened to me in a decade of reviewing) to accuse me of malice, incompetence, and not having read his book. Ouch! That one really hurt. My sacred honor as a book reviewer had been called into question, which was particularly wounding because of the many weary hours I had spent getting through what must be to anyone not a Clinton-scandal fanatic one of the most boring books ever written. I had been secretly proud of having been able to read to the end this dull catalogue of the comings and goings of various lawyers, all more or less indistinguishable one from another except by the sole relevant datum of whose side they were on. For that, after all, was all that mattered, as much to the authors as to their subjects on both sides of the Clinton question.

But what was it all for, this triumph of tedium? Only to prove that poor Bill and Hillary have been cruelly, *cruelly* used by their political enemies, the poor darlings, just as if they were Republicans or something, and *properly* subject to merciless legal and moral scrutiny in the press and the courts. I didn't say any of this in my review. On the contrary, I proclaimed my readiness to accept Conason's and Lyons's central argument and to cry "Uncle!" Enough facts, please! I, like the Clintons, I thought, had suffered enough. But because I thought to add what ought to have been obvious, that the excess of the authors' zeal for the latter might in some degree call into question their conspiratorial conclusions, I was publicly traduced.

And not only by Conason himself. Howard Kurtz put me in his "Media News" column of the *Post*, announcing in typical fashion (like many journalists these days, Kurtz is never happier than when agonizing over something some other journalist has done that might be seen to compromise the profession's supposed Olympian detachment from politics) that I had been a "curious choice" as reviewer of the two books. The *New York Daily News*, on no evidence save (presumably) Conason's say-so, described me as "a diehard Clinton-hater" and then quoted with apparent approval his opinion that I had "deceitfully misrepresent[ed] the contents of our book." Even little Lyons managed to get in a surreptitious kick in the shin from far away in Clinton country. From there, where he is doubtless known as the Leibniz of Little Rock and the Aristotle of Arkansas, he undertook to instruct me in the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*—by both precept and example.

Were it not for the timely intervention of a worse review by Neil Lewis in *The New York Times Book Review*, which soon drew the authors' fire, I might have begun to fear that, in parts of the country where my fame has not yet reached, I should be known forever only as the unfair and deceitful reviewer of poor Joe Conason's and poor Gene Lyons's *apologia* for poor Bill Clinton. The late Mr. Jesse James seems to have enjoyed a happier fate.

None of this would of course be in the least worth mentioning here except that the tale provides evidence of the state of public discourse in America that goes well beyond the highly polarized matter of the Clinton scandals. Consider, for instance, the massive media coverage of the Elián González story, which in some parts of the country was an even bigger story than that of Conason's and Lyons's ill-usage by their critics. Both stories were only stories at all because they promised the drama of a battle *à outrance* between utterly opposed cultural forces. For it was apparent that, just as there was no one left with a word to say in public on the subject who was not either pro- or anti-Clinton, so it was that there was no one left

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who was not either pro-Miami or pro-Havana as the future residence of poor Elián, whose name as pronounced by the news anchors and anchorettes sounded so pathetically like "alien."

To be sure, there was a difference between the Clinton and the Elián stories, since Elián's actually required a decision, either/or, A or B. There was no middle ground between staying in the U.S. or returning with his father to Cuba, though some people continued to hope that Juan Miguel González would defect and stay in the United States to raise Elián. What an agonizing choice for the family or, if the family could not come to an agreement, for a family court to have to make! But the intervention of the attorney general on the one hand and Fidel Castro on the other, and of course the photogenic boy caught between these two incomprehensible forces of the adult world, made this small but painful dilemma into something quite other.

For it was not as an agonizing choice that the story was presented to us but, as *Newsweek* put it, "The War Over Elián." Just like James Carville's "war" against Kenneth Starr, such language was a way of the media's crying out for attention, but its intemperance in both cases had the effect of making the metaphor into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more extreme the position that both sides could be persuaded by the media to stake out, the more that these positions attracted the heavy bruisers of the power elite on both sides of the Florida straits, then the more incongruous the contrast between the great ones and the little boy and the better the story. First they made Elián into a celebrity, then lamented that the littlest celebrity had become a "political pawn" or "political football" according as your taste in cliché runs to sedentary or active sports. What was missing here? Hmm. Let's see. Oh, I know. Elián would never have become a political hockey puck if he hadn't been a celebrity first. And it was the media that made that happen.

Thus an accusatory Cokie Roberts asked Linda Osberg-Braun, one of the Miami family's spokesmen, on "This Week" on ABC if the family thought "it is in the best interests of the child to have all these demonstrators around the house?" But why were the demonstrators there? Because the TV cameras were there. And why were the TV cameras there? Because Cokie's network and others put them there. If she thought it bad for the child, why didn't she urge her bosses to pull the plug? If, as everyone on both sides so strenuously protested, the interests of the child had been paramount, the first thing that everyone outside the family and its chosen mediators would have done would have been to tiptoe quietly away and let the case be decided out of the glare of international publicity.

But once the cameras were rolling and the politicians (therefore?) had been indiscreet enough to express an opinion on the matter, it was like the mobilization of troops in July and August 1914: from that point on the "war" could not be stopped. And from that point on, too, it could accomplish nothing apart from demonstrating which side was the stronger. That is what wars do, and if you are squeamish about it, you had better not get involved in one. But the media characteristically get involved and then proceed to cluck in an insufferably moralistic fashion about how wrong and stupid and unfair it is, just as if they were not involved. From their Olympian perches, the media gods feel honor-bound to pretend not to take sides in these quotidian quarrels (it is the price of their godhead)—and then to take sides anyway. That is why Joe Conason can in all sincerity condemn the "partisan" nature of the investigations of the president and Mrs. Clinton while simultaneously insisting that his own slavish defense of the president against those same investigators is, somehow, not partisan at all.

Something similar happened in the case of Elián. The hatred of the Miami relatives for the Castro regime, to which the boy's father proposed to return him, reawakened the passions of the Cold War among the punditry too. The likes of Anthony Lewis of

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The New York Times and Richard Cohen of *The Washington Post*, whose anti-anti-Communism had had little employment since the Clinton impeachment provided them with the last Cold War surrogate, were ready to charge again. All the old Olympian assumptions about the "moral equivalence" of the West and the Communists were taken down and dusted off with a few disclaimers about how everyone now recognized the fatal weaknesses of the Soviet system and, indeed, always had done so. Charles Krauthammer's was a lone voice pointing out the falseness of this contention, and that for the last twenty years of the Cold War the formerly anti-Communist left had all but ceased to exist.

Now, however, Fidel Castro could safely be acknowledged a tyrant and dictator, though that did not prevent the gods from doing the tyrant's work for him, urging the "extremism" of the Miami relatives and the perfect paternal love of the presumed Castroite, Juan Miguel González. That same "extremism" was a handy rhetorical device by which moral equivalence could be established. Thus Maureen Dowd, *The New York Times*'s exponent of what James Wolcott calls "postfeminist chick lit," began her column on April 2 by writing: "Many argue that it is an outrage to expect Elián González to live in a place that tolerates no dissent or freedom of political expression." Then a pause for a new paragraph: "But I don't think Miami is so bad." Oh, that Maureen! A couple of weeks later, she was showing her mettle as a postfeminist chick by what could only be described as taunting Janet Reno for a failure of manhood in not sending in an FBI snatch squad to take Elián from the house of his uncle.

It's the way she tells them. The "Today" show's equivalent of chick-lit wit, Katie Couric, shamelessly borrowed Miss Dowd's conceit, saying that "Some suggested over the weekend that it's wrong to expect Elián González to live in a place that tolerates no dissent or freedom of political expression. They were talking about Miami." She then went on to quote Miss Dowd's temporary neighbor on the op-ed page, David Rieff, as describing Miami as "an out-of-control banana republic within the American body politic." In another *New York Times* op-ed piece a few days earlier the Nobel Prize-winning novelist and inveterate Castro apologist Gabriel García Márquez had employed his gift for fantasy in order to proclaim that it was landing safely in Miami that was "the real shipwreck" of little Elián.

Though "extremist" on some reckonings, such views were not uncommon on America's television network news shows, as Brent Bozell's valuable surveys for the Media Research Center showed, and in the popular press. They show how moral equivalence arguments can easily elide into claims of moral superiority for the Cuban workers' paradise, at least as a home for little Elián. Thus Brook Larmer and John Leland in *Newsweek*:

> Elian might expect a nurturing life in Cuba, sheltered from the crime and social breakdown that would be part of his upbringing in Miami. Because Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, works as a cashier in a tourist resort, the family already belonged to the nation's well-off stratum, who has access to American dollars. The boy's relatives in Miami can offer further support: Cuba now even has ATMs that dispense dollars from foreign banks. The education and health-care systems, both built since the revolution, are among the best in the Americas, despite chronic shortages of supplies. . . . The boy will nestle again in a more peaceable society that treasures its children. But his life will oscillate to the contrary rhythms of this central Cuban paradox. As a shining symbol of the communist state, he will have access to the corrupting fruits of the new economy. He'll enjoy the best Cuba has to offer, the things only dollars can buy.

The "corrupting fruits of the new [i.e. dollar] economy" is a comical turn on what was elsewhere another commonplace of the pro-Havana brigades, which was the spiri-

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tual and moral disaster of American childhood. Mary McGrory in *The Washington Post* was particularly passionate about the material plenty threatening America's youth, and Maureen Dowd, with characteristic sarcasm, asked how could a Communist spoil the boy "with the awesome stuff he has now—Tommy Hilfiger duds, a Labrador pup, a Power Wheels hot rod, a beeper, gold chains, cell phones, and his own Web page?" And then of course there is the matter of his celebrity.

> Let's be blunt. Dads are a dime a dozen. What is best for the child is to take full advantage of his cachet in the U.S. of A. . . . The kid will need representation. He can't go back to Cuba. There isn't a decent publicist on the entire island.

And then there is another of those witty paragraph breaks: "And we must always do what's best for the child."

But she was not kidding when she wrote that Elián "vindicates our culture: celebrity status, play dates with Diane Sawyer, and a free pass to Disney World outweigh blood ties." I yield to no one in my distaste for both the celebrity and Disney cultures (though in the case of the former, Miss Dowd was hardly an innocent in the celebrity-minting process), but there is a wanton disproportion in the comparison, a deliberately skewed perspective that would weigh in the balance the waste product of freedom against the essential fear and hopelessness (at the best) of totalitarian tyranny and profess to find the scale tilting toward the latter. As in the case of the vicious personal attacks on Elián's Miami relations that appeared in, for example, the on-line magazine *Salon*, you had to wonder what was at stake for the pro-Havana side that they were so willing to assault both reason and decorum in pursuit of their cause.

Salon, of course, provides a regular forum for Joe Conason's pro-Clinton views, and was briefly famous during the impeachment process by publishing thirty-year-old personal dirt on Henry Hyde, the leader of the House Republicans who brought the impeachment to the Senate for trial. Now *Salon* was obviously working as hard on behalf of Juan Miguel González and Fidel Castro as before it had worked on behalf of Bill Clinton. For those who are disposed to think of culture and politics in military terms, I suppose it was easy to see the two as separate theaters of the same war. But my point about Conason and Lyons's book in my review was that rhetorically they had made it impossible for their argument to succeed intellectually. Call your opponents fools, scoundrels, and conspirators and you have little chance of persuading them of anything.

Their response was of course to call *me* a fool, scoundrel, and conspirator. Presumably at some stage they had to make the judgment that they weren't going to succeed in making a rational case anyway because the other side wasn't listening—of course they weren't! They were fools, scoundrels, and conspirators!—so they might as well just beat the drum for their side. This is war, after all, as their blurbist and the master-figure of the Clinton era, James Carville, has defined it. But the media's flurry around "poor" Elián had no such excuse. It was they who had made a family quarrel into what David Rieff called a "circus of fanaticism"—and in the process reminded us (if reminders were needed) that they have almost no capacity anymore for decency or discretion. It is only what we should expect of those whose sensibilities are blunted by war.

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Fiction chronicle

Meditations, good & bad

by Brooke Allen

If there were to be a competition for the most pretentious novelist of the last decade or so, honorable mention (after Salman Rushdie, perhaps, and David Foster Wallace) would have to go to Michael Ondaatje. *The English Patient* (1992) was the worst type of pretentious book, too, one without even a redeeming idea or theme to make its pretensions on any level excusable. What was it supposed to be about, anyway? What did the bandaged man stand for, except for the purest solipsism and narcissism? Just where was the nurse supposed to be taking him, and to what end? All it finally amounted to was hip affect, a quality that was consummately realized in the movie version that was to all intents and purposes a two-hour Ralph Lauren ad.

Ondaatje's new book, *Anil's Ghost*,[1] has much in common with *The English Patient*. What other author, for instance, could come up with such an exquisitely meaningless paragraph as this one?

> Lovers who read stories or look at paintings about love do so supposedly for clarity. But the more confusing and anarchic the story, the more those caught in love will believe it. There are only a few great and trustworthy love drawings. And in these works is an aspect that continues to remain unordered and private, no matter how famous they become. They bring no sanity, give just a blue tormented light.

Or this equally idiotic stretch of dialogue:

> "You like to remain cloudy, don't you, Sarath, even to yourself."
>
> "I don't think clarity is necessarily truth. It's simplicity, isn't it?"
>
> "I need to know what you think. I need to break things apart to know where someone came from. That's also an acceptance of complexity. Secrets turn powerless in the open air."
>
> "Political secrets are not powerless, in any form," he said.
>
> "But the tension and danger around them, one can make them evaporate. You're an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It's in the bones and sediment."
>
> "It's in character and nuance and mood."
>
> "That is what governs us in our lives, that's not the truth."
>
> "For the living it is the truth," he quietly said.

What is all this supposed to *mean*? There is so much of this empty claptrap in *Anil's Ghost* that it stifles the novel's merits, which are not inconsiderable: unlike *The English Patient*, it deals with a war that is not just an imagined landscape, as Ondaatje managed, amazingly enough, to render World War II, but a very recent war that is in fact still going on, and about which the world is

1 *Anil's Ghost*, by Michael Ondaatje; Alfred A. Knopf, 320 pages, $25.

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disgracefully ignorant, as it is about so many regional conflicts.

The long struggle in independent Sri Lanka between the mostly Hindu Tamils, who had acquired significant political power under the British, and the Sinhalese (Buddhist) majority that began to chip away at Tamil rights with the advent of majority rule, erupted in the 1980s into an undercover war that soon spread among the Tamils themselves, who split into different groups with different war aims. Both the separatists and the government resorted to violence, and hundreds of murdered corpses have been discovered each year, to be disposed of in terror and silence.

Into this disaster zone steps beautiful Anil, a forensic anthropologist—that is, a doctor who studies corpses in pursuit of historical, anthropological, or medical evidence. Anil left Sri Lanka to study medicine in England when she was a girl; after her parents died in a car crash a few years later she decided not to return. She has practiced her grisly craft in trouble spots around the world—the opening scene, for example, is set in Guatemala—and now, fifteen years after her initial departure, is returning to her native island as part of a human rights investigation to be conducted under the auspices of the Sri Lankan government, a dubious sponsorship since it is the government itself that presumably is responsible for a large portion of the unsolved murders. Anil is teamed up with a middle-aged archaeologist named Sarath, a friendly but unforthcoming widower whom Anil suspects of being instructed by the government to spy on her and keep her from discovering too many secrets.

In the stereotype of romantic novels, Anil is presented as a rebel: but against what, exactly? Her parents seem to have been loving if strict; embarrassingly bourgeois, of course, but what did they do to turn her so firmly away from her culture and background? Probably her rebellion is merely a part of the vaguely romantic female prototype Ondaatje dotes on, the restless, dissatisfied seeker. Passionate too, of course: there is a ridiculous flashback in which we learn that in a fit of pique Anil stabbed her married lover, a writer, in the arm before taxiing away into the night, calling out as she goes, "Remember this is what I did to you in Borrego Springs. You can make a story out of it."

Eventually Anil and Sarath discover a corpse that can only, from its location, have been a victim of government forces, and they embark on a quixotic search to discover the body's identity. In the course of their arduous task we are introduced to a number of other characters, *echt*-Ondaatjean romantics all. There is Sarath's brother Gamini, a young man destroyed by love for his brother's wife (the wife, who presumably loved him too, killed herself by ingesting lye, then showed up at his emergency room to die in his sight). Gamini has let his marriage and his personal life shrivel away to nothing and entirely devotes himself to the hospital, where he even sleeps and eats. Then there is Palipana, an elderly, blind epigraphist, once Sarath's academic mentor, who has retired from the world and lives alone with his damaged niece in an abandoned forest monastery, a sort of secular monk or even saint. And there is Ananda, a former painter who, since the disappearance of his wife during the height of the political crisis, has taken to drink and self-destruction.

All these characters wander about in a sort of solipsistic fog, bumping against one another occasionally but all sunk too deep into their own psyches to connect on more than a primitive, nonverbal level. It would be easy enough to dismiss *Anil's Ghost* as the same sort of nonsense *The English Patient* was, but the fact is that Ondaatje has chosen a subject that might be, that *ought* to be, interesting. As a reader of this novel one longs for more hard information about Sri Lanka, about the life of the country, the insurgency, the war. But Ondaatje's not in the business of providing anything so prosaic; he prefers a rhetoric of pseudo-poetry, and he sticks wherever possible to the vague, the impres-

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sionistic, the foggy. Emotion and affect have priority over facts and description, and *Anil's Ghost* has no sense of place whatever; it might just as well take place in Rwanda, the Congo, Sarajevo, or any other modern warzone. Odd, and too bad, considering that Ondaatje is writing about his own native land as well as his heroine's.

"True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" These are the opening words, of course, of Poe's self-revealing murderer of "The Tell-Tale Heart," possibly the most famous mad narrator in English or American fiction. Barry Unsworth doesn't come clean quite so speedily in his new novel, *Losing Nelson*; he waits until the third paragraph before allowing his narrator to expose his insanity.[2] Charles Cleasby, a London bachelor, has just purchased a Wedgwood plate with the image of Lord Nelson on it, and he is returning home on the Underground when there is a delay on the train line due to security checks.

> Imagine my feelings [says Charles]. This was February the fourteenth; it was the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, Horatio's first great disobedience, the day he became an angel. On this day, at 12:50 P.M.—just over an hour's time—his ship, the *Captain*, went into close action. And here I was among this mute herd, sweating despite the cold, a good two miles from my tables and my models. The ships were not even set out. It mattered so much to get the time right, therein lay the whole meaning—how else could I keep my life parallel with his? Before my father died—he died last April—I fought out this battle wherever I could: on my bed, on the floor, one freezing day in the shed behind the house. We never missed, year after year we broke the line at ten minutes to one. Now I had the basement all to myself. The thought that I might fail the appointment now was unendurable, it made me feel sick.

It is all laid out here: the neurotic, indeed unbalanced identification with Nelson, the compulsive habits and behavior, the strange relationship between this mature man and the father from whom death has only recently freed him. There will be more to learn about Charles Cleasby, much more, but the essentials are contained within this paragraph.

This novel has generally been reviewed as a work that debunks heroes and hero-worship, but such an interpretation seems inadequate to me. We live in an antiheroic age, after all; our heroes have already been debunked, or are in the process of being so. Right now Thomas Jefferson, only a few years ago a hero as towering in this country as Nelson was in his, is undergoing the same degrading treatment. That Horatio, Lord Nelson was an imperfect being will come as a shock to no one except poor, deluded Cleasby himself—and not even to him, in his heart of hearts. What *Losing Nelson* really is, is the story of how a good and harmless person is ruined; it is the tale of an emotional murder.

How was this blighted soul created? Charles was the victim of an emotionally sadistic father and a mother who, terrified of her husband and too weak to fight him, abandoned her two sons to his mercies, running off to India when Charles was only nine. In deep grief for his mother, Charles vainly seeks his father's love and approval as a replacement for hers. How can he succeed? What are the right things to do to win admiration? "I think now," the adult Charles is intelligent enough to say, "that for my father there were no right things, but as a child I tried to find out what they were."

One of little Charles's few talents was chess, but one day he beat a friend of his father's, a well-known player, and Father was anything but pleased. To keep the boy from feeling proud, he held a book before his eyes, with pictures of Pitt the Younger and Horatio Nelson. "Take a good look," the father said. "Those two men saved our country. They had reason to be pleased with themselves."

2 *Losing Nelson: A Novel*, by Barry Unsworth; Doubleday, 338 pages, $23.95.

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Charles's interest in chess, needless to say, did not survive the experience, but his obsession with Nelson—"the splendid young fighter, so slender and small-boned, so different from me in physical form"—had just been born. Over the years he began to conceive of himself as Nelson's dark side, the human twin of what he believed to be the "angelic" Nelson. As indicated in the paragraph quoted above, he keeps the Nelson calender with religious intensity, celebrating and reenacting every known event in the great man's life as though his own life depended upon it. He labors, painfully and absurdly, over his biography of Nelson, "The Making of a Hero."

But in the course of these travails he has hit a snag in the form of Nelson's apparently treacherous delivery, in 1799, of the Neapolitan Jacobins into the vindictive hands of the Bourbon monarch, a deed Southey called "A stain upon the memory of Nelson and the honour of England"; "To palliate it," he said, "would be in vain; to justify it would be wicked: there is no alternative, for one who will not make himself a participator in guilt, but to record the disgraceful story with sorrow and with shame." This Charles cannot do: it is, he notes, "as if my being depended on his truth."

Onto the scene comes Lilian Butler of Avon Secretarial Services, hired by Charles to take dictation as he composes his *chef d'oeuvre*. Miss Lily, as he shyly thinks of her, brings a breath of outside air into his claustrophobic life, as well as providing a running commentary on Nelson that amounts to an alternative vision of the great man and of the entire concept of heroic behavior. She complains,

> "Nelson is one of those people who think they are above everything. Whatever they do is all right because they are so popular. Like those footballers who play for England, or that punk group that smashed up the hotel, the Sex Pistols, gone without trace now, thank God, or someone like Woody Allen, who goes and marries his adopted daughter when he is old enough to be her grandfather."

Charles is appalled by the analogies, of course, but the message makes an impression, especially when Miss Lily hazards that Nelson's capacity for ruthlessness was due to having been torn away from love and family as a child—an easy enough concept for Charles to understand and another point in common between him and Nelson. And yet, Miss Lily doesn't seem to connect the two men at all:

> "No, I've said it before, he puts my back up—Nelson, that is. He was always so ready to get people killed. If you look at it one way, he was a sort of serial killer. I like men who are gentle and kind and try not to hurt anyone. . . . People like you, Charles. . . . I have to say that you are just about as different from Admiral Lord Nelson as a person could possibly be."

Miss Lily is a strange sort of siren; her seductive call is that of sanity, of ordinariness, of Labour politics, middlebrow ideas, and old-fashioned values. It is powerfully attractive as it wafts into Charles's rarefied, fetid inner world. Will he, won't he, take the plunge into normalcy? Unsworth keeps us in suspense right up to the end—and yet, when we reach the final page, we realize that in fact only one outcome was ever possible.

The name of Jim Crace is not famous in this country, but he has long been considered, and deservedly so, one of Britain's better novelists: every sentence that he writes is original and closely observed, worth reading and reading again.

It is hardly enough to say that Crace is an atheist. "I'm not even a relaxed atheist, I'm a post-Dawkins scientific atheist," he once said in an interview with the *Manchester Guardian*. His 1998 novel, *Quarantine*, an imagined version of the historical Jesus and his forty days in the wilderness, was certainly meant to debunk religion and the religious impulse, but Crace turned out to be too imaginative an artist to stick to anything quite that simple, and the book

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developed into a near masterpiece of poetic ambiguity that reflects not so much the absurdity but the sadness of our often pathetic gropings toward the immortal. Crace's new novel, *Being Dead*,[3] can be seen as carrying on his project of scientific atheism, yet it has none of the dryness the term suggests: instead it gilds bare, bleak mortality with a beauty and redemption that can stand on their own, without the questionable aid of creed or dogma.

Joseph and Celice are professors of zoology: personally unremarkable, even unattractive, conventional, deeply sunk in middle age. Their lives, in the eyes of more flamboyant characters like their daughter Syl, are "dull and geometric." They live and work in an English coastal town, and keep low profiles: "Hardly any of their colleagues had ever seen them together, or visited them at home, let alone witnessed them touch."

At the beginning of the book this unlikely pair has been murdered, their heads bashed in by a psychopath who killed them for their car and the contents of their pockets. The first image the novel provides is of their recently expired bodies, spreadeagled on the grass by the little cove, the site of their first romance, that they have unluckily decided to revisit on this day after some thirty years of marriage.

Out of this beginning grow three parallel narratives: the story of Joseph's and Celice's past, their courtship and married life; the story of the six days between their death and their discovery, a time in which their absence is noticed, and their daughter reluctantly returns home to search for them and finally, aided by the police, finds the truth; and the story, not the least interesting in the book nor the least meaningful, of the slow disintegration and breakdown of their corpses on the beach.

As zoologists Joseph and Celice calmly understand the fact that has driven so many people to seek solace in God: life has no point, "other than to replicate and decompose. Hard truths."

> Here in the dunes—with Celice's spread body, her rustling hair, her husband hanging from her leg, as centrepiece—was a fine display to illustrate the annual fieldwork lecture she gave, normally with slides of putrefying seals or tide-abandoned fish, to the faculty's new and squeamish students: "Anyone who studies nature must get used to violence. You'll have to make yourself companionable with death if any of you want to flourish as zoologists." She meant that fear of death is fear of life, a cliché, among scientists, and preachers too.

The first to discover the still-intact bodies is a beetle, *Claudatus maximi*, attracted by blood and the smell of urine; then swag flies and crabs; then a gull. The scavengers and the elements do their work; the earth has begun its task.

> The earth is practised in the craft of burial. It gathers round. It embraces and adopts the dead. Joseph and Celice would have turned to landscape, given time. Their dead bodies would have been just something extra dead in a landscape already sculpted out of death.

Crace creates what is in effect a spiritual vision out of the most earthbound ingredients, details we are usually accustomed to perceive as disgusting. In a similar fashion he creates an odd aura of romance around a couple whom no one, even in their youth, ever saw as romantic.

Celice and Joseph met as students while staying at a university study house located near the cove where they later meet their deaths. Celice was a gawky girl, not at all pretty, but she had discovered that when it comes to one-night stands men are really not all that choosy, and she had therefore acquired a certain breezy sexual confidence. Of the four young men at the study house she found Joseph by far the least promising:

> She'd already marked him down as what she called a castaway, someone who'd lost or never

3 *Being Dead*, by Jim Crace; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 192 pages, $21.

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> knew the trick of being sociable, a single set of footprints in the sand. She didn't care for him at all. She'd been a castaway herself.

But Joseph had already recognized her as his own. "He was surprised how much this woman had enthralled him. . . . She wasn't beautiful. She was provoking, though. She was, he knew instinctively, his only chance." In the strange way that such stories work out—life's plan, as it were—Joseph's barely revealed interest attracts Celice to him, and they have a heated sexual encounter on the secluded beach near the study house. Another lesson of biology, though, is that where there is sex there is also death: while they were so heedlessly having their way with each other, the study house had caught fire and one of their colleagues had died in the flames. The likelihood is that it was either Joseph or Celice who had caused the fire as they hurried out that morning.

In their mid-fifties now on the day of their death, sex has lost its urgency, as of course is only natural. Joseph still yearns after his wife more than she does for him: "her greatest fantasy was a night of unbroken sleep," and she is more apt to feel irritation than lust toward her husband. "Besides, her Joseph was a conquest she'd already made and didn't need to make again. At least, not frequently." It is Joseph, ever hopeful, who has insisted on this trip to the beach to revisit the scene of their first passion; he wants to make love there once again, and she decides to humor him, hard though it is for her to drum up much enthusiasm.

"Yet there still was love, the placid love that only time can cultivate, a love preserved by habit and by memory." And when their bodies are found by the police, Joseph's hand is still cupped around Celice's foot in a gesture that Syl, a hard girl who has never felt anything but scorn for her boring parents, recognizes as love, and envies, and admires. Her grief is limited, but she is more moved than she had ever expected to be.

> Syl had to allow them this at least: her parents had surprised her this one time. Not just their murder. Nor their nakedness. But that they had the power, on their deaths, to flush her heart—too late—with love.

Being Dead is a remarkable piece of work, utterly unsentimental yet beautiful, faintly comical yet full of measured gravity, and quite unlike any novel I have read before. It is also as consoling a meditation on death as an atheist is ever likely to encounter.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Books

What the monsters know

by Jeffrey Meyers

Virgil's Aeneas, weeping over the frescoes that depict the fall of Troy, voices the tragic sense of life that animates all poets: "Tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by human transience." In "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth describes the wrenching extremes of a poet's moods:

> But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
> Of joy in minds that can no further go,
> As high as we have mounted in delight
> In our dejection do we sink as low.

James Dickey (1923–97), handsome, blond and blue-eyed, formidably energetic, large, and larger than life, scaled the heights. College athlete, air force navigator, advertising executive, guitarist, archer, hunter, teacher, performer and poet laureate, winner of a Guggenheim fellowship and a National Book Award, he covered the Apollo launching for *Life* and read his poetry at President Carter's inauguration. He made more money from his writing than any American poet of his time. In 1996 his income was $187,000, his assets $800,000, and he was "practically a conglomerate." But he knew the tears of things, and caused a good many of them to be shed. He was a tragic figure who exclaimed: "I am a haunted artist like the others. I know what the monsters know."

Dickey has been ill served, even betrayed, by his son, by his literary executor, and by his biographer, who show little understanding of his genius or the reasons for his agonizing suffering and sharp decline. Christopher Dickey's memoir, *Summer of Deliverance* (1998), by turns hard-boiled and mawkish, first accused Dickey of killing his wife, Maxine, and then turned Iron John into Jello Jim. His literary executor Matthew Bruccoli was a longtime colleague at the University of South Carolina. But Bruccoli's selection of Dickey's letters is superficially introduced and inadequately annotated.[1] He misses the reference to Gertrude Stein's description of Pound as a "village explainer," and in his notes says that Denis Donoghue is American, rather than Irish, and that Stansky and Abrahams edited, rather than wrote, their two-volume biography of the early Orwell. The letters are painfully repetitive and, lacking a proper context, sometimes baffling. They emphasize Dickey's boastfulness, flattery, and condemnation of rivals as well as his brazen self-promotion.

I first met Dickey in 1981 and corresponded with him for ten years. At his best, I found him extremely witty, ironic, even mock-heroically self-deprecating. He wrote that when he missed a shot at a buck, "the arrow rattled around in his antlers. He seemed, literally, to be playing with the thing." When he left his advertising firm, his

1 *Crux: The Letters of James Dickey*, edited by Matthew Bruccoli and Judith Baughman; Alfred A. Knopf, 574 pages, $35.

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colleagues lamented like "Priam weeping over the body of Hector." Recalling the once fashionable (and now taboo) outdoor statues of little black grooms, Dickey provocatively threatened to invite James Baldwin "out here, dress him in livery, and make him stand on the lawn in front of my house." At Reed College, where he briefly taught, "everybody has a beard except one or two of the girls." When his old sports car caught fire, he was "Surrounded by more blue-black smoke than Satan when he fell or was pushed from the crystal battlements of Milton's heaven." Of a divorced daughter-in-law, he remarked: "everybody in the family loved [her] but Chris." And on a tiny commuter plane to a small town in Carolina, he solemnly asked the stewardess: "What movies do you have on this flight? And when do we land in Tulsa?"

Dickey's plodding biographer, Henry Hart, toiled on his book for six years,[2] seems to hate him, and takes every opportunity to gloat over his boorish behavior and many misfortunes. Hart's ponderous style and priggish moral superiority replace Dickey's verve and panache. To Hart, he is simply the Great Liar. Even the photos in the book make him look fake. As a boy in high shoes and leggings, Dickey pedals furiously on a bicycle that's resting on its stand, and in the Poe Museum he writes with a stuffed raven on his shoulder. Always eager to blame, Hart claims that "The Faustian consequences of [Al Braselton's] friendship with Dickey were divorce, alcoholism, bankruptcy, a son's suicide, and his own near suicide." Four-hundred pages later, Hart quotes Braselton's telling Dickey "what a profound and beneficial influence you have been on me," but does not explore the contradiction. Hart obsequiously calls Bruccoli an "acclaimed biographer" and "renowned Fitzgerald scholar." But who, apart from Bruccoli himself, ever acclaimed him? Like Bruccoli's *Fitzgerald* and Jay Parini's *Steinbeck*, Hart's biography lays a dead academic hand on this marvelous material and transforms Dickey's tragedy into soap opera or farce.

Hart dives into Dickey's massive archive and, like most American academics, serves up everything he's found, including two pages on a meeting with Eliot that never took place. Instead of bringing the cast of characters to life, Hart provides repetitive and stupefying catalogues of courses and grades, people and places (listing every stop on every reading tour), which are neither interesting nor illuminating and bring the narrative to a grinding halt. The book, printed in extremely small type, would have been better if cut by one-third. It's much more difficult, in fact, to write a short biography than a long one. The best lives, like Michael Ignatieff's *Isaiah Berlin*, are selective and analytical.

Hart's book is filled with errors. Half-a-dozen foreign words lack diacritical marks; he misspells the Japanese Dai-Ichi Hotel and the Marunouchi train line, Conrad's Marlow, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, and T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, as well as Ernst Jünger, Winfred Overholser, Vernon Scannell, Dwight Macdonald, Budd Schulberg, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt —even Stamford, Connecticut.

Hart has a shaky grasp of modern culture. He claims that the popular tourist sites—Naples, Capri, and Pompeii—are "unlikely spots" to visit and that Losanna (the Italian name for Lausanne, Switzerland) is in Italy. He states that Swift came to Ireland in the early seventeenth (instead of early eighteenth) century and died in 1715 (instead of 1745). He attributes to Oscar Wilde a quote by Lord St. Leonards; misstates the first name of Sir James George Frazer; says H. G. Wells, who died at the age of seventy-nine, lived into his eighties; maintains that Mary Welsh was Hemingway's third (not fourth) wife; gives the wrong title of Mann's tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers*; calls the American biography *Journey to the Frontier* a "British novel"; misquotes Frost's "I only go when I'm the show"; ignores the

2 *James Dickey: The World as a Lie*, by Henry Hart; Picador, 811 pages, $35.

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fact that Dickey's 1966 view of the "dark Frost" was based on Lionel Trilling's essay of 1959; and thinks the Ph.D. is an honorary degree (it might have been in his case).

Worse still, Hart's remarks on literature, like Dickey's stray arrows, are wildly off the mark. He compares Dickey's sensual second wife to Dante's Beatrice; says Ernest Dowson's exquisite lyrics are antiquated and hackneyed; states that the swan in Yeats's poem on Leda is "camouflaged"; absurdly likens Proust's refined Marcel to the rough hero of Dickey's failed novel *Alnilam*; refers to the nonexistent "criminality of artists" theme in *The Magic Mountain*; attributes "monstrous appetites" to the ascetic hero of *Doctor Faustus*; maintains that Jake Barnes's war wound in *The Sun Also Rises* "complicates" his sex life (!) and that Harry's vivid memories, which sustain him during his agonizing death in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," are a "series of drunken lies." Hart doesn't realize that Dickey was invited to the White House to meet Léopold Senghor because the African statesman was also a distinguished poet. He misses many important allusions that give depth and resonance to Dickey's work. "Noli me tangere" comes from John 20:17, "a new heaven and a new earth" from Revelation 21:1. "Nature red in tooth and claw" comes from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the "Demon of the Perverse" from Poe. Dickey's "Here lies one whose name was writ on fifty-seven thousand freshman papers" parodies Keats's famous epitaph. "But where's the bloody horse?" comes from "On Some South African Novelists" by Roy Campbell—who had a great deal in common with Dickey. "*Muss es sein? Es muss sein!*" (misquoted by Hart) has nothing to do with Dickey's German grandmother; it's the epigraph from Beethoven's String Quartet No. 16, Opus 135, which Randall Jarrell used as the epigraph to his first book, *Blood for a Stranger*. Dickey's description of his fear of wartime flying—"the mechanics with a hose [had] to clean the shit out of the cockpit"—strangely foreshadows the shocking conclusion of Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." Quoting Dickey's "The fox knows many things, but the groundhog knows one big thing" (he was born on Groundhog Day) without noting the allusion to Isaiah Berlin's *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Hart misses both the wit and the context of the aphorism. Berlin attributed the phrase to the Greek poet Archilochus; Hart, muddled as always, calls it "an old Russian proverb."

Hart's subtitle should have been "Life as a Lie," for he runs his thesis into the ground and takes pleasure—hundreds of times—in exposing Dickey's lies. Hart, however, is also gullible. He traces Dickey's "origins to Richard Talbot, a Norman baron who came to England with William the Conqueror," and assumes all his (often self-serving) informants have told him the truth. Dickey, who was not on oath and preferred the imagined to the real, exclaimed: "I'm an artist. I make the truth." Despite his considerable achievements (he wasn't a pilot but did fly 120 combat hours in the Pacific and won five Bronze Battle Stars), his ego demanded the creation of a mythical life, a Hemingway-like legend and a series of invented selves that attracted readers and sold books. Refusing to distinguish between fact and fiction, history and fantasy, for his imagination sparked all of them, he liked to make up stories to hoodwink and entertain. The humorless Hart ignores Dickey's deliberate outrageousness and desire to shock. Impatient with his civilized self as well as with his repressed and respectable audience, Dickey often thought: "What is the worst thing I can say or do at the moment?"

Such a complicated character, however appalling his behavior, cries out for understanding and elucidation. Instead, Hart solemnly and inexorably lists his deceits. Dickey's lies spring from deeper motives than the desire to scandalize. Like so many American writers, he had a strong mother and weak (or absent) father. He called his wealthy father, who raised fighting cocks and owned a lot of real estate in Georgia, an "unsuccessful lawyer, a born loser." But he desperately wanted to impress his father,

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who disdained poetry, with his own outdoorsmanship and military prowess. Dickey also had to compete with his dead—and therefore perfect—older brother as well as with a younger brother who was a much better athlete. When reality was insufficient, as it usually was, Dickey—like Hemingway and Malraux—created myths. As Dickey wrote of his *semblable et frère* Theodore Roethke, his favorite American poet,

> these lures and ruses and deceptions did enable him to exist, though painfully, and to write; they were the paraphernalia of the wounded artist who cannot survive without them.

In one agonizing scene, witnessed by an artist who illustrated Dickey's extremely lucrative coffee-table books,

> Dickey was lying on the floor, cursing, and banging his fists up and down, and the girl [in his bed] was saying, "That's all right, Jim. I know you can do it."

Dickey once told me that a biographer should be "an investigative reporter of the spirit." But Hart, ignoring the spiritual element, is as heartless as a cosmetic mortician. Describing this scene, he merely concludes, without a trace of sympathy or compassion: "Exhaustion and alcohol had once again rendered Dickey impotent." I hope Hart will never have to confront the demons of drink, marital strife, and disease that destroyed Dickey, but if he has to, I doubt that he could face them with Dickey's stoicism and courage.

In his self-reflective essay on Roethke, Dickey asked:

> Why all this insistence on being the best, the acknowledged best, the written-up best? . . . And why the really appalling pettiness about other writers like Lowell, who were not poets to him, but rivals merely? . . . His broad, boyish face had an expression of constant bewilderment and betrayal, a continual agony of doubt.

Yet Dickey himself, creating a Roethkean persona of a poet who hung around with tough guys and was pretty tough himself, brought his aggressive and competitive instincts, reinforced by sports and business, into the world of poetry. Like a cornered buccaneer, he angrily cut and slashed a path through his rivals.

Like Yeats, who on Swinburne's death confidently declared himself "king of the cats," or John Berryman who uneasily asked, when Frost died, "It's scary. Who's number one? Cal [Lowell] is number one, isn't he?," Dickey proclaimed himself *capo di tutti capi* after Berryman threw himself off a cold Yankee bridge and Lowell became crackers. But Dickey was not, despite his ungenerous letters, entirely negative. He could bless as well as blast and admired his early masters: Hopkins, Crane, Tate, and Dylan Thomas. As Hart concedes, Dickey praised "Geoffrey Hill, Philip Larkin, W. S. Graham, and Jon Silkin among the British; John Berryman, Howard Nemerov, and Theodore Roethke among the Americans." His critical missiles, though ungracious, were devastatingly on target. Jarrell *was* sentimental, self-indulgent, and self-pitying; James Merrill, with whom Dickey maintained an uneasy truce, often *was* a "chocolate-frosting of a poet"; Anthony Hecht *was* tiresome in his empty elegance. Anne Sexton, obsessed with "the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience," he wittily lampooned as "Ragtime Annie." John Updike was (and is) superficial, unoriginal, and too negative—slick and prolific, but devoid of content.

Hart gives endlessly repetitive, mind-numbing accounts of how Dickey, living up to his reputation as a hell-raising poet, became drunk, lecherous, out of control—breaking up furniture, parties, and marriages while reaping the sexual rewards of poetic fame. When, by force of will, he suddenly stopped drinking but refused to take drugs to ease his withdrawal, he suffered a seizure, bit off part of his tongue and nearly bled to death. Incisive about his own failings but unable to help himself,

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Dickey observed:

> People say that the good feeling that alcohol gives you is false—but all you have to do is live a human life to know that, in many instances, a false good feeling is better than none at all.

Hart doesn't explain that when Dickey's later poetry failed to correspond to his self-generated hype and the burden of honors he'd received, the old navigator lost his bearings and tried to obliterate his sense of unworthiness with alcohol.

Dickey's two marriages were disastrous, but Hart does little to explain his powerful bond with these two most important women in his life. His first wife, Maxine Syerson, was the illegitimate child of a Danish immigrant, who abandoned her mother just after she was born. Hart vaguely describes her as "gracious, fun-loving, and capable of running the practical business of a household," and cryptically adds that her "efficiency was evident in her 'practical approach to sex.'"

After Maxine bore two sons, began to drink heavily (partly because of Dickey's adultery), and gained a lot of weight ("Hast thou seen the white whale?," Moby-Dickey would ask when she entered the room), she had for him "the sex appeal of a walrus." She became frigid; he became impotent with her and continued to consort with other women. But, completely dependent on her, he always came back. She was "the last of the poet's wives who could stick it out," and preferred to be Mrs. James Dickey than Ms. Nobody. In 1976, after twenty-eight years of marriage, Maxine suffered a massive internal hemorrhage (there was so much blood on the floor that Dickey first thought she'd been attacked by a burglar) and died at the age of fifty.

Dickey's marriage two months later to the beautiful Deborah Dodson (she was twenty-five and he was fifty-three) was even more of a nightmare. Deborah became a heroin addict, pawned Dickey's possessions, stole his medicines, and was violently threatened by her criminal suppliers. She had drug-induced seizures to match his alcoholic ones. After smashing Dickey on the head with a heavy frying pan and causing a massive blood clot that needed an emergency operation, Deborah had to be committed to a mental institution to save her own life—and his. Despite the traumatic marriages, Dickey's children turned out remarkably well. Christopher became a successful author and the Paris bureau chief for *Newsweek*, Kevin a professor at Yale Medical School. Bronwen, abandoned by Deborah and brought up by Dickey, went to Choate and published a touching obituary of her father in *Newsweek*.

After teaching brilliantly at Rice, Florida, Reed, and San Fernando State, in 1968 Dickey finally got a permanent post at the University of South Carolina—another third-rate university in an extremely dreary town. His precipitous decline began right after the astonishing success of his novel *Deliverance*, which had sold 1.8 million copies by 1973, and of the superb film (for which Dickey wrote the script and played the redneck Sheriff Bullard) based on his book. Hart fails to note that Dickey's deterioration coincided with his long, tedious years in South Carolina.

Dickey's serious health problems began in 1980 with a major operation for a hiatus hernia. His intestine had strangled his esophagus, which made it much easier to drink than to eat. After the doctors "challenged the Dark Man with their short knives," his weight suddenly dropped from 250 to 190 pounds. His blood clot operation was followed in 1994 by a severe case of hepatitis, which attacked his liver and nearly killed him. After a long struggle, he was finally finished off by fibrosis of the lung.

Hart does not ask, let alone answer, the big questions about Dickey's life. What accounts for his self-destructive streak and sharp decline? Pride, arrogance, egoism, vanity, and perhaps some hidden tragic flaw certainly contributed to his demise. Perhaps, in America, the rewards for success are

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too sudden and too ample, the penalties for failure too great. As Hemingway, a negative model for Dickey, bitterly observed in *Green Hills of Africa*, nearly everything can hurt a vulnerable writer: "Politics, women, drink, money, ambition. And the lack of politics, women, drink, money, and ambition."

Finally, we must ask, how good is Dickey's best work? Two of his novels are first-rate. William Styron, who says more in a sentence than Hart does in fifteen pages, wrote, "[I] began to see how *Deliverance*, which I had so admired as a novel, was in a sense an allegory of fear and survival"—a *Heart of Darkness* for our time. Hart misses the point of the greatly underrated *To the White Sea* when he claims that its "puerile machismo soon turns pathological." On the contrary, the hero of Dickey's intensely lyrical and dramatic novel achieves transcendence through a mystical identification with nature. He is not meant to be a pleasant fellow or a virtuous man. Shot down in wartime Japan, he is—like the hero of *The Call of the Wild*—an expertly trained, self-reliant, and necessarily ruthless survivor.

Dickey's best poems, published in his first five volumes between 1957 and 1967, include "May Day Sermon," "The Performance" (about the beheading by the Japanese of a captured American airman), "The Firebombing," "The Sheep Child," "Adultery," "Encounter in the Cage Country" (inspired by Rilke's "The Panther"), and "Falling" (about a stewardess who was sucked out of a plane). These deeply moving poems express Dickey's transfiguring imagination, delicate sense of music, courageous tenderness, and capacity for wonder. They "strike the reader," as he said, "down through the more obvious levels of his being into the hidden and essential ones." Dickey's reputation, battered by his letters and biography, now seems at a low ebb. But, ten years from now, we may come to appreciate him more. The greatest postwar American poets may not be the manic confessionalists, Lowell and Berryman, but the more joyous and affirmative Roethke and Dickey.

Last bastion of reason

Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend
For and Against Method. Edited with an introduction by Matteo Motterlini. University of Chicago Press, 451 pages, $34

reviewed by James Franklin

The old century—and we hardly need a longer perspective to see this—was beset by, and in cultural life almost defined by, an unteachable *enfant terriblisme*. From Dadaism to the Sixties to postmodernism, it was sufficient to throw tomatoes at tradition to get a full-page spread from the intellectual paparazzi.

Let us not spend more time recalling any more of the isms and idiots of the culture of complaint, as the process of forgetting them is already well advanced and it may be unethical to impede it. Instead let us remember the possibilities that existed for those who wished to retain their sanity. Where to escape to? In the world of the humanities, there was always the past, and many a cultural refugee from various modernisms recuperated through communion with Monteverdi or Vermeer or Jane Austen. But for those who preferred their culture still living and breathing, the most extensive vandal-free space was science.

Not quite all of science escaped the spirit of the age, unfortunately, and a few of the parts most visible from outside the scientific world caught some unpleasant philosophical diseases. High theory in physics was good science, but in its journey to popularization it acquired some German idealism that left it coated in prose about reality being "dependent on the observer." The achievements of genetics suffered a similar fate, becoming known largely through the snide inverted Panglossianism of "selfish gene" explanations of sociobiology. Real science, the kind that thinks hard and finds out what is the truth, became relatively hidden from view. It was still going on, though, and keeping happy several genera-

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tions of dedicated researchers, almost all of them cheerfully oblivious to the cultural commentators' manifold demonstrations to the wider community that the pursuit of truth is impossible.

Two regions of science were particularly free of any modern nervousness about themselves. One was engineering, for the obvious reason that bridge construction on cultural relativist principles is forbidden by the laws of nature as strictly as by those of man. The other was mathematics.

Mathematics has several advantages as a cultural counterweight to relativisms and scepticisms. Everyone knows something about it—in fact quite a lot about it—so it is not necessary to take the word of experts about everything in it, as it is for, say, quantum physics. Secondly, the mathematical truths are subject to proof, and what is proved does not become unproved (though it can be proved better). For these reasons mathematics has always been an unfailing support for rationalist views, views which exalt the capacity of the human mind to find out the truth. Conversely, mathematics has been a perennial thorn in the side of those who abase human knowledge and claim it is limited by sensory experience, cultural experience, or one's personal education and perspective. Any culture or person that can count to four has discovered that 2 + 2 = 4, and should any fear arise of losing a grasp of that truth, resort to counting stones will quickly relieve anxiety.

Naturally, most cultural relativists have given mathematics a wide berth. Just a few have been prepared to claim that 2 + 2 = 4 *is* culturally relative, and that a different culture might find it more convenient to negotiate another answer, such as 5, or 37. It needs a certain strength of mind to fill a book with arguments to the effect that the arguments found in mathematics cannot reach an absolute truth, but it is certainly possible, as demonstrated by the existence of Paul Ernest's *Social Constructivism as a Philosophy of Mathematics* (1998). This work has not so far made much impact outside faculties of education.

A single work did, however, succeed in undermining confidence in mathematical proof. It was the slim and compulsively readable book *Proofs and Refutations* (1976) by Imre Lakatos, the Hungarian philosopher of mathematics who ascended to Karl Popper's chair at the University of London when the latter retired in 1969.

The idea of the book was to follow the historical development of the proof of a single mathematical theorem, Euler's Theorem, and to "show" that it did not really succeed in establishing the theorem beyond doubt. One of several ironies in the affair was that the success of the book was partly due to the fact that the theorem being undermined was so interesting. It is easy to appreciate even for those whose school mathematics has virtually disappeared, and it is in any case quite unlike the recipes for symbol manipulation that make school arithmetic so boring in the first place.

Imagine a cube. Count its faces (six: top, bottom, and four sides), its edges (twelve: four around the top, four around the bottom, and four down the sides), and its vertices or corners (eight: four around the top and four around the bottom). We now calculate the number V – E + F, meaning the number of vertices minus the number of edges plus the number of faces. For the cube it is 8 – 12 + 6, which is 2. The remarkable thing is that V – E + F is also exactly 2 for almost any solid one can think of, even those which have vast numbers of faces in the style of a Buckminster Fuller dome. (Even more generally, the flatness of the faces has nothing to do with the result, so it works for a network of lines drawn on the surface of a sphere as well.)

A simpler case is a pyramid (including the bottom), for which V – E + F (please try out your mental visualization facility one more time) is 5 – 8 + 5, which is 2 again. The secret lies, somehow, in the minus in front of the number of edges E: for solids with many faces, the extra vertices and edges are balanced by the extra edges. To begin to understand why this balance is exact—why extra vertices and faces are always exactly

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balanced by extra edges—imagine (last time) a square face on some perhaps large solid. What happens if we draw a diagonal of the square? The number of vertices V does not change. F goes up by one (since the square face has become two triangles), and E goes up by one (since we have added one new edge, the diagonal). So V – E + F for the whole solid is unchanged. The standard proof of the theorem proceeds by using this idea in reverse: one gradually removes edges, faces and vertices, showing that V – E + F is unchanged in the process, until one reaches a simple figure where one can count and find that V – E + F is 2.

So what does Lakatos have to say? He points out that there are certain solids for which the theorem is not true. One example is a cube with a hole drilled through it. *Proofs and Refutations* is structured as a classroom encounter between a teacher and a crowd of besieging students who suggest further counterexamples to the theorem each time the teacher tries to amend the theorem to exclude them. There are many historical footnotes intended to show that the classroom encounter is a "rational reconstruction" of the real history of the theorem. Lakatos's conclusion is that this theorem, and by implication mathematical theorems in general, are never really proved, but always subject to refutation by further counterexamples.

It requires mathematical advice to explain why Lakatos's project is fundamentally dishonest. Most of the many mathematicians who read *Proofs and Refutations*, it is true, were not very alarmed by it. But that is because of the touchingly mole-like blindness to matters philosophical for which they are known, and which led them to believe Lakatos's conclusion was merely that the teaching of mathematical theorems ought to be more interesting. Better informed mathematicians were not deceived. The distinguished Princeton mathematician John Conway pointed out that, for one thing, Euler's Theorem is atypical in that the terms in it turn out to be difficult to define. "Face" might seem clear, but do ring-shaped faces count? The vast majority of mathematical theorems, for example about numbers or algebra, do not have any such problems. Lakatos also refused to admit that the theorem has been proved of *some* solids—for example cubes—until it is established for *all* the solids for which it is true. But most misleading of all was his failure to describe the final state of the theorem. All the problems about ring-shaped faces, holes, and so on can in fact be cleared up, but doing so requires that one should have the full classification of surfaces correct. This is a difficult and complicated, but not infinitely difficult and complicated, mathematical result. Lakatos stops his story just before getting to it, in order to leave the impression that the truth will never be pinned down. It is simply impossible that he should have stopped at exactly that point honestly.

There is more to complain about. For example, one may doubt Lakatos's claim to be supported by history when he has admitted to writing a "rational reconstruction" of history—that is, the history that would have supported him if only it had happened. And Lakatos is one of the worst offenders in the compulsive scattering of quotation marks to "neutralize success words." The word "proof" is a success-word, that is, it is part of its meaning that something proved is true, and that the proof has succeeded in showing it is true. So when Lakatos has his teacher say things like "I am not perturbed at finding a counterexample to a 'proved' conjecture; I am even willing to set out to 'prove' a false conjecture!," it is impossible to understand what it being said, though the reader is certainly left unsettled about the notion of proof. As the Australian philosopher David Stove explained in *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists* (1982),[1] Lakatos puts quotation marks around words like "show," "facts," "discovered," and "proof" so often that it is impossible for

1 Stove's book was republished in 1998 as *Anything Goes: The Origins of the Cult of Scientific Irrationalism* (Macleay Press).

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the reader to know when, or if, he thinks knowledge ever advances. Stove writes of Lakatos's use of the word "proof":

> In the book it is subjected countless times to neutralization or suspension of its success-grammar by quotation marks. Often, of course, equally often, Lakatos uses the word without quotation marks. But what rule he goes by, if he goes by any rule, in deciding when to put quotation marks around "proof" and when to leave them off, it is quite impossible for the reader of that book to discover. Nor does the reader know what meaning the writer means to leave in this success-word. He knows that the implication of success is often taken out of it; or rather, he knows that on any given occurrence of the word in quotation marks, this implication may have been taken out of it. But what meaning has on those occasions been left in it, he is entirely in the dark.

It can hardly have seemed likely in the glorious days when Euclid finally delivered the manuscript of his *Elements* and Plato required the study of geometry of entrants to the Academy that the distant future would find mathematicians defending their access to the realm of forms by polemics on the misuse of quotation marks. It did not seem any more likely in 1900, but the twentieth century had a number of surprises in store of a similar nature. The forms, unfortunately, cannot defend themselves, as they do not have a causal action on the physical world. Neither ethical nor mathematical truths and ideals can fight tanks, or blizzards of quotation marks (though again, neither can they be liquidated by those enemies). They depend on human minds in tune with them to act on their behalf—to implement those ideals and teach them to the next generation. And the necessary defensive action that this implies has to be against whatever attacks have actually appeared, however ridiculous.

Who, then, was the real Lakatos? From the effect—the works of Lakatos—it would be natural to rationally reconstruct the cause as a typical Sixties irresponsible leftist guru. Nothing could be less true, as revealed now in full in Matteo Motterlini's *For and Against Method*. This includes Lakatos's "Lectures on Scientific Method," but consists mostly of the correspondence between Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend, from 1968 up to Lakatos's sudden and untimely death in 1974. Feyerabend was a philosopher of science at the extreme irrationalist end of the spectrum, known principally for his *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (1975), which maintained that witchcraft was as rational as science. Feyerabend really was a typical Sixties irresponsible guru. He writes to Lakatos from Berkeley on 28 February 1970:

> Future events in my philosophy of science class:
>
> Tomorrow: discussion on the *New Left*.
>
> Next meeting: hidden variables.
>
> Then: Genesis and Evolution.
>
> Then: St Thomas's angelology as a contribution to the theory of light.
>
> [The philosopher John] Searle is again trying to get me fired. . . . The only bright things are the little chicks here, and the freshmen altogether. They are very naive, but nice and undogmatic.

Lakatos was fascinated by this not from any sympathy but because, at least by this late stage of his life, it was his repressed Other. Lakatos had spent three years in jail in Hungary in the early 1950s after the Communist Party had investigated an incident during the war in which he had apparently taken the lead in encouraging the suicide of a fellow member of a Communist cell whose Jewishness was thought to render her silence under interrogation unlikely. He fled Hungary in 1956, confessed he had reported politically on colleagues, and found refuge at the London School of Economics. By the time of the correspondence with Feyerabend, he was in favor of the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and was urging the authorities to firmer action

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against student radicals at the LSE, the scene of some of the worst student disturbances in Britain.

Lakatos was a dangerous customer, in other words, because he was not a one-sided and ignorant ideologue trapped in a single thoughtworld. It was the same with his intellectual activities. He was no ignorant postmodernist attempting to undermine reason from a distance with some general-purpose argument to the effect that "everything is social." He knew modern logic and the technical investigations of the Vienna Circle on the logic and language of science. *Proofs and Refutations* has the impact it does because Lakatos knows the mathematics—or as much of it as he chooses to know—and can take the reader through it. The question is how he came to jettison so much of his intellectual past, and to believe himself a friend of reason, while making his living out of a project fundamentally irrational. What exactly had he taken on in youth that he found it impossible to discard?

The answer to this question appears in Brendan Larvor's recent study *Lakatos: An Introduction* (1998). It appears even more clearly in a remarkable article in *History of the Human Sciences* (May 1998) by V. Dusek on how the debate between Lakatos and Feyerabend in science recapitulates that of their mentors, Lukàcs and Brecht, on aesthetics and on methodology generally. The childhood intellectual trauma that Lakatos could never throw off was Hegel—in particular Hegel's theories about the primacy of history. Lakatos himself never quite lost Hegel's faith that there was some rational direction to history. But his work served to reinforce a much more modern version of historicism. The idea that any given phenomenon should be explained primarily by stating the history of how it got to be that way (with the implication that it could equally easily have got to be some other way) is one that has done immense damage in every branch of learning. Lakatos's "achievement" was to give this thesis a color of plausibility in the discipline most resistant to it, mathematics. It is in mathematics that is it most obvious that the fundamental reason why the theorems are as they are is that they agree with the absolute truth. To use one's mathematical talent to make it appear otherwise, as Lakatos did, is to take the route described by Marlowe:

> *All*: God forbid!
> *Faustus*: God forbade it, indeed, but Faustus hath done it.

Eager to hear & tell

Bonnie Kime Scott, editor
Selected Letters of Rebecca West.
Yale University Press, 544 pages, $35

reviewed by Carl Rollyson

Readers of *The New Criterion* will not need an introduction to Rebecca West. Yet even those familiar with her life and work will find startling new material in this superbly edited collection of her correspondence. Although West was always outspoken, her letters reveal a behind-the-scenes candor that provides insight into her reporting on the suffragists, the New Deal, Yugoslavia, the Nuremberg Trials, the Cold War, Communism, and much more. Devotees of her great novels, *The Fountain Overflows* and *The Birds Fall Down*, will be granted a new awareness of their autobiographical and historical roots.

Born in 1892, West remembered the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria and the sight of soldiers returning from the Boer War. This collection begins with a letter to *The Scotsman* (October 16, 1907) in which a fourteen-year-old West (still using her family name, Cicily Isabel Fairfield, but already a feminist and a socialist) expresses her strong opinions on the subjection of women. At a very early age, in other words, West was already an accomplished writer and a figure bound to attract the public eye.

West was attracted to the stage. Indeed,

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her pen name is that of Ibsen's heroine in *Rosmersholm*. Short, dark featured, opinionated, West did not seem to theater directors the kind of ingenue they could fit into their productions. Abandoning a theatrical career, West began writing for journals such as *The New Freewoman* and *The Clarion*, and was adopted by literary lights such as Ford Madox Ford, who admired her keen intelligence and astringent style. West came to Ford's attention when she had reviewed one of his novels rather negatively. Similarly, H. G. Wells took her up after she ridiculed his view of women in *Marriage*, one of his "conversation" novels. In both cases, she challenged these men in the name of their better books. Naturally, they had to meet the precocious writer who exuded such an air of authority.

How West became entangled with Wells is an often told story, but Scott includes letters that provide the context for their ten-year affair and show how West eventually extricated herself by going to America in 1923. Scott also includes a long letter which West sent to one of her sisters describing New York in the 1920s. It is of extraordinary interest as an almost documentary re-creation of a moment in history. Biographers of West have not had the space to do this letter and others justice.

West crossed the Atlantic dozens of times in the 1920s and 1930s, writing stories, articles, and columns for *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The New York American*, *The Bookman*, *The New Republic*, and many other newspapers and journals. She warned of the rise of fascism and the likelihood of another Great War. She went to Washington and met many officials in the Roosevelt Administration, including Francis Biddle, who later became her lover during the Nuremberg trials. What makes West so indispensable is her acute literary and political sensibilities, her yoking of the psychological and the sociological, and her understanding of the individual psyche and of bureaucracy. Only in her letters do you learn that while she supported the New Deal from the start, she had misgivings about its shoddy administration, poorly conceived programs, and lax security procedures. West never minced words and never pretended not to have visceral reactions to people, which influenced her opinions of them: "Eleanor Roosevelt is the most hideous being imaginable and was dressed fantastically badly and radiated charm and vitality, partly the result of her lovely voice," West wrote to *The New Yorker* editor Harold Ross, who commissioned many of her brilliant postwar reports on spy trials.

West's comment on Roosevelt demonstrates her penchant for exaggeration (*most hideous*?). For the most part, the editor Bonnie Kime Scott lets West have her way with words, however extravagant, but occasionally in the notes the editor rightly feels compelled to point out errors, inaccurate gossip, or simply prejudices that other observers of the scene or members of her family did not share. Indeed, West sometimes wrote such fantastic letters that her reliability as a reporter—perhaps even her mental equilibrium—have to be questioned.

Such is the case with her account of Huey Long, which she sent to the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. I very much wanted to put this report in my biography of West, but I saw no way to verify her account or to integrate it into a narrative of her life. Now the letter is available and worth close study, both for what it says about Long and what it says about West. The letter weaves a most baroque tale that involves Long questioning her closely about an operation on her breasts. That she had such an operation I can verify, that Long knew about it without West telling him (as she asserts) seems very strange—or perhaps it sheds a whole new light on the senator and Washington politics. I cannot make up my mind which.

The Long letter should be read in tandem with West's report of a UFO. She presents a detailed account of a mysterious object in the sky which she tracked for a considerable period. She was not persuaded by the matter-of-fact explanation she received from the government. As in her investigation of spies

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and traitors, she knew when something was afoot—even if, in this case, she could not solve the mystery.

Although some of West's letters may strike one as the monologues of an egomaniac and mythomane (to use the term West applied to those she thought had mythologized their lives), most of her correspondence is very sociable and engaging. She wants to tell her correspondents about herself, but she is eager to hear about their lives in return. Letters constituted a conversation for her.

Undoubtedly, there are some good letters left out of this volume. But Scott has chosen a representative collection, featuring the best letters on the subjects to which West kept returning. No reader needs, for example, every letter she wrote about her fraught relationship with her son, Anthony West. On the topic of family West often repeats herself—as most of us do. Nevertheless, there will be a need one day for a new selection, or an updating of Scott's volume, since many of West's letters remain in private hands and others, thought to have been lost, may still turn up.

Because of her seventy-year literary career, West seemed to know or to observe everyone of importance in the century. She provided a smorgasbord of commentary on, variously, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Arnold Bennett (she called him one of her literary "uncles"), Lord Beaverbrook (one of her lovers), Janet Flanner (a *New Yorker* colleague), Emma Goldman, John Gunther (another lover), Violet Hunt, Fannie Hurst, D. H. Lawrence (one of her literary heroes), Sinclair Lewis, Senator Joseph McCarthy, Harold Macmillan (whose family published her), Somerset Maugham, Henry Miller, Sir Harold Nicolson, Anaïs Nin, Paul Robeson (they were friends in the 1920s), Harold Ross, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (she thought him soft on Communism but they later became friends), May Sinclair, Dorothy Thompson, Tito, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, and Alexander Woollcott.

West's range of friends was astonishing—from the British comic Frankie Howerd to the CIA director Allen Dulles. Her range of subjects was equally broad. She could elaborate the most byzantine theories of history, then turn immediately to delicious gossip and anecdotes. Her letters are serious, flirtatious, and extremely funny. As one of her friends once said to me, "she gave good value." She had the gift of making anyone she spoke to—or wrote to—feel important.

It is sad to report that most of West's novels are out of print and that much else of her work has never been collected. In the last stages of her career she wrote brilliant book reviews for the London *Sunday Telegraph*. Indeed, Hilton Kramer called them at the time the best of their kind, and his assessment holds true. A selection of her hundreds of essays and book reviews deserves to be printed in two or three volumes. Perhaps this edition of the letters will spark the renewed interest needed to make Rebecca West our contemporary once more.

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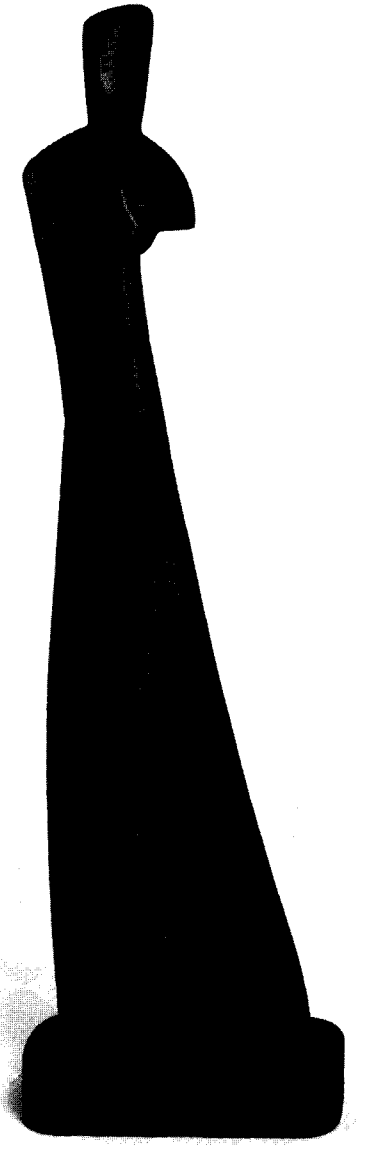

Joséphine Bonaparte, 1935. Terra Cotta polychrome, 25½ inches high

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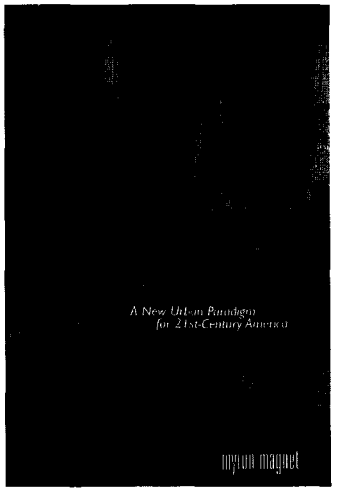
City Journal's Blueprint for Urban Rebirth



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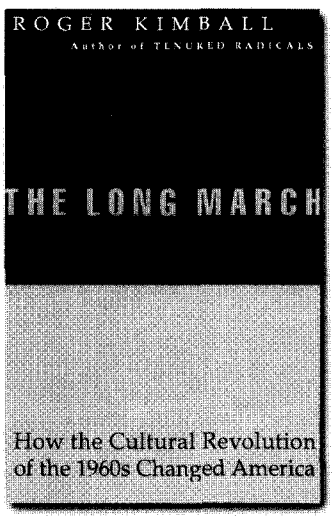

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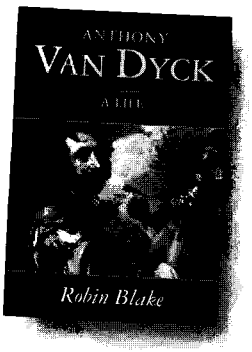

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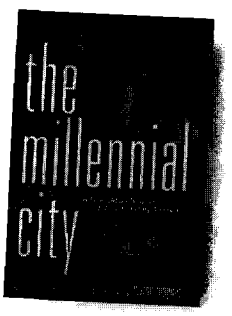

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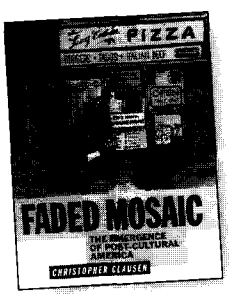

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